

*“I Just Go and Do”*

## **ELIZABETH STEEDLEY**

Born 1943 – Retired 2002



**Elizabeth taught in a middle school in a small Georgia town for thirty years. She retired after the deaths of a son and an uncle, the final illness of her mother, and a divorce. She spends her time teaching in a GED program for the Georgia State Prison System, and relaxing on a family farm, cooking and driving her Kubota 3400 tractor.**

**I** was born in 1943 in Nashville, Georgia. My mother taught sixth and seventh grades and my dad worked building military bases, in the Brunswick shipyard, and later, as a small-town home builder.

I went to Valdosta State, studied business, and got my master's in education. Then I taught in the public schools for thirty years. I married at nineteen, after my first year of college. I had two boys. I lost

my oldest son in an accident, when he was twenty and home from college. He was driving a tractor, mowing, and it turned over. That was a very hard time. I was married for thirty-five years. I'm divorced. I don't think you can have a major tragedy and get through it without becoming closer, or you'll grow farther apart. It's part of you. I've been divorced for nine years.

I have four grandkids. They all live in town. My son is a part-time juvenile court judge and has a law practice in town. My son enjoys being a lawyer. He's a good judge, because he's a fine young man—not a young man anymore, he's forty-four.

I retired at age fifty-nine. I just needed a rest. At that time I had gone through a divorce, my uncle had died, and my mother was not doing well. One of my sisters was in the same town as my mother, about sixty miles from here, and was her major caregiver. I was the only sibling living nearby. I'd make two trips a week to help. It was a thing I needed to do, so that's what I did.

As I've gotten older, I have friends that I enjoy being around. I have girlfriends that we go and do and shop. I have gentlemen friends, too. I have one particular friend who has been very supportive in our friendship, and I have enjoyed going and doing things with him, too.

When you're older, I don't think you feel the need to be attached to someone. I had one long marriage and I'm probably the type of person that's meant to be married for life, like an animal that mates for life. So it's been very hard for me to marry again. I've had proposals; I have just not wanted to make that step. Once you've been married a long time, everything is intertwined, things like credit cards, simple things. When you're married, you got this identity together; when you're single, that changes.

Once you get everything separated, you get your credit card, your debit card, your bank account, your CD, and your whatever. As an older person, this is important, it becomes very hard...You think twice about the different people you meet, and you think, *Could I make it forever and ever and ever with that person, or would I have to go through the same thing again?*

When you're young, you just throw caution to the wind. It really doesn't matter. It's going to be fine. Whether you have the next meal on the table or not, you don't worry about that too much. You're supposed to be struggling a little anyway. You enjoy it. You don't worry about it. As you get older and you go through retirement, you do have to worry about it because you don't want to have to ask your children for anything. You don't want to be dependent. You want to maintain your independence. At the same time, you want to leave your children financially secure. You still think of them even after they're out of the house. You want to make sure you leave your grandchildren something. Not that they couldn't make it on their own.

I talk to other divorcees, and not everybody is like me. Some will say, "That's the person I'm going to marry and be with for the rest of my life." I'm not going to say that's not going to happen to me. I'm just saying that up to this point it hasn't. I think one thing, too, I've been very busy. I lead a very busy life.

As I approached retirement, I was so exhausted. I was just going to rest. I did, and I caught up on things. I traveled a little bit, to St. Simon's, to Savannah, to Florida and different points of interest. Maybe not way off, but I traveled around to Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Hilton Head, and Charleston.

I like to go up to my farm maybe two, three times a week, just being up there, especially this time of year. The fall colors are so pretty on the Alapaha River. The river has a life of its own, and it all depends on nature and the water coming from north Georgia, feeding into the different streams and then into the main river. The river rises in Georgia, flows through north Florida into the Suwannee River, where five rivers meet.

The farm is thirty miles from my home. In years past, it was a big working farm: livestock, tobacco, corn, peanuts. It's one hundred acres. It was part of a land grant to my ancestors dating back to the American Revolution and was divided on my uncle's death. I let another farmer grow cotton up there. I don't rent it. I just love to see the

cotton grow and see the fields the way they used to be. The farm is up in Berrien County. It looks like a step back in time. I have the house, the barn, and all the outbuildings; the tobacco barn, the corn grinder, the syrup boiler, and all the things you'd have on a farm. The syrup boiler, as a small child, it was a big thrill.

When I go up there, I enjoy. I like to cook. Like this morning it was real crisp, so I got up and made blueberry pancakes, with blueberries grown right here on the farm. Putting them up takes a little time during the summer. And I grow flowers. I have flowers. Also, I like to mow the pasture with a Kubota 3400. It will pull a six-foot mower. I simply like to do that, get the fresh air. It's an easy tractor to drive. You push your foot forward and it goes forward. Push your foot back and it goes backward, power steering and all that. So no big deal, and I enjoy it.

I have neighbors near the farm. In fact yesterday, my neighbor—she's an older woman—came and visited, old-time style. You don't see a lot of that anymore. She's lonesome, because until I go up there, there's only one other neighbor she can visit with. So she came down and visited and talked general woman talk. She's near her eighties. She and her husband are getting on in years. It's a remote property, and since its river property, it's good to be in touch with your neighbor. You have to watch out for one another. My next-closest neighbor is about a mile from me.

The other day I had a delightful surprise...a new neighbor has moved in, a retired naval commander, only in his forties. He walked up and introduced himself. I thought, *Well, golly!* He was so young-looking, and he was actually forty-something. That's young to retire.

He bought the place so he would have it to hunt. The deer are very plentiful, and the wild turkeys and all that are very plentiful, then the ducks on the river. If you're into...I suppose you call it blood sport...I'm not, but I do realize the herd has to be controlled because it gets to be a bad thing.

Even when I am not at the farm, I like my flowers, I like to grow flowers. I have a flower garden—daylilies, gardenias, camellias—things

you have in a Southern garden. My mother, when she retired, had a nursery, and my sister and her husband have one now.

In my first year of retirement I joined a group over at Valdosta State. We would do yoga, courses on computers, candy making, etc. I also learned dancing, ballroom dancing, and swing dancing with my friends. This was my first year out of divorce and I enjoyed being with a group, rather than just being singled out. It was therapy for me. I like to dance. I've always liked to dance. I think it's good for me, too.

After a year, I got restless and started thinking there is something else I can do. I wanted to be helpful. I did librarian work at the Homerville Prison. I was there for five years until it closed. Then I got a position at Robert L. Patton Detention Center in Lakeland, a couple of days a week. I have been there eight years. I teach all five subjects for the GED program: English, social studies, math, reading, and writing. The students are not there because they missed Sunday school. It's a prison. Sometimes they look at you and tell you something they did, and it's not like they're proud of it. There's a real broad range. Some are as young as eighteen and some appear to be fifty. Prison is not a good thing...it's a very dangerous place.

It's an outlet I need. At this time of life you need to feel as though you're productive. I need to be helpful. I need to be productive; that's just part of who I am. I teach because I've been busy all my life; it's hard to stop. I really like to do this. I've taught all my life, and I don't know anything else.

I love for them to get their GED. It is simply so fulfilling. When you see those prisoners—through their own fault they are where they are at—when you see how happy they are, and their first response is, “Oh, my family is going to be so proud of me! My wife is going to be proud of me! My children are going to be so proud of me!” When they actually see that all the work they put into it, the studying; they got something themselves. You see, I didn't go with them to the test. The only thing I do is teach them. They know it's what they have done. It's

not something I have done for them, because it's not. All I have done is teach them.

As a teacher in middle school, I was focused on being goal-oriented. You don't really get to sit back and just enjoy the children. You feel a lot of responsibility simply because the child is young and doesn't have the same motivation you have. Whereas in the prisoner mode, their focus is a little different; they're motivated to do it.

You don't have that much time to enjoy any one prisoner's success, because as soon as this one gets his GED, you fill that space. I teach a class of twenty, but it's specialized to their needs. The majority of them will tell you the reason they quit school is because they were thrown out for being incorrigible, or being disruptive, or some type of criminal activity. Some reason they did not fit into society, and you are going to have that segment that quit because they were not motivated or because of the drug culture. The drug culture has taken its toll. I have twenty students for four hours, two days a week. I have prison aides who help with correcting the tests and tutoring. I have to make sure the material is covered. The students have to make a certain score on the practice test before they're allowed to test for the GED. I don't think I was ever really scared of going into a prison. Remember, I taught middle school.

I think I'll know when it's time to retire. [*Dog barks.*] That's a little Chihuahua, four pounds of yappy, Libby. She's a blond Chihuahua. I don't know why she wasn't named Marilyn Monroe. My granddaughter got her when she went to college and asked if I would take her. And guess what—I did what all goodly moms do. Basically I did not like a dog in the house. So I adjusted. Now, she's so watchful and very generous. I do enjoy her. She's a good thing.

I can't say I don't worry about the future. I do. If I found a companion to go through life with, I think that would be great. I haven't as of yet, and a lot of that might just be me because I'm so hesitant. I'm not an exception; a lot of people who were married a long time find themselves in this situation. I have a lot of wonderful memories. Right

now, I find my life very full. I don't see the urgency, maybe I should! I'm having a good time in my life. I am enjoying myself.

I go all the time. Shopping with my friends, trips with my friends, I go out every weekend. I'm lucky as an older woman because I stay busy all weekend long with people. Maybe I am an exception. Maybe there are some lonesome people in the world. I don't have time to get lonesome.

Honestly, I think that making new friends is the easiest thing in the world for me because I'm receptive. I will meet anybody from whatever class of life. I am not saying I will go with them anywhere or do anything with them, but I'll meet them and talk with them, which has always been an easy thing for me to do.

I've become more conscious of my decisions, more conscious of my example, more accountable. I've already lived way more than I'm going to live. You have to face that your productive years, when you can really get out and do, are not as many as they were. So you got to be selective. You have to choose how you're going to spend these years.

I volunteer through church and teaching Sunday school. Now I'll do, but I won't take responsibility for a position. I've met too many deadlines. I'll help you out as much as I can. Just tell me what to do, but don't put me down as responsible for all of it.

Somewhere along the line I hope I've made a difference. And I'm teaching now, I feel sure I'm making a difference, especially when that prisoner has that GED in hand and a chance at a better job, which may or may not be true if they're in that prison turnstile lifestyle. Nothing's more rewarding than seeing prisoners get their GED. All the time they thank me. "You have inspired me. You pushed me." That's very rewarding.

It has nothing to do with money. I'm very hopeful for their futures.