Carrying around the Rockefeller name would surely be an asset in our fame-obsessed culture, right? Wrong, says Kirwan Rockefeller, great-great-grandnephew of John D. Rockefeller, the man who built Standard Oil, and second cousin to his grandchildren, among them Nelson, Winthrop and David, who last year gave away $225 million to libraries, universities and other institutions.

"The name Rockefeller has been my greatest gift and, up until age 45, it was also my greatest challenge," he says. "I've had more doors slammed in my face because of my name. People have their own preconceived ideas of who I am before I even walk into the room."

That was then. Today, Rockefeller, the director of Arts and Humanities, Continuing Education at UC Irvine Extension, says he feels freed of the pressure that comes with having such a famous name. A few years ago, he experienced a personal liberation, if you will.

"I knew I'd finally arrived," says Rockefeller, 53, who is single and lives in Newport Coast. "I was very centered, quiet and alive—just alive!"

That sense of well-being coincided with Rockefeller's ability to "connect the dots" of his eclectic life, which has had many career twists.

"Everything I've done makes sense and has played a part in what came before and what came afterward. I could see how this led to this, which led to this, which led to this," says Rockefeller, tracing imaginary lines in the air with his finger.

Thus, he says, his first career as a dancer and choreographer was a "way to find my own voice" among a family of overachievers.

"I realized at a young age that I was a part of something much larger than just myself. When I told my father that I wanted to be a dancer, he sort of went, 'Ahhh, a dancer,' but I think later he came to understand why," says Rockefeller, who traces his love of the performing arts to the many childhood cultural excursions he took with his family to New York City and Washington, D.C.

When he was just starting out, he heeded a "little voice inside my head" that told him to leave his native Virginia and head west. In hindsight, he says it was probably his subconscious telling him to forge his own path and find his own way in life.

He landed in Seattle, and found steady work as a modern dancer. A picture from that time in his life sits on a credenza in his office: He's dressed in fitted pants and a T-shirt, and is six feet off the ground in a tucked position, his lithe, 6-foot-3 frame seemingly defying gravity. "I leave it there because it reminds me of the exhilaration of working with my body and soaring," he says of the photo.
From dance, Rockefeller made an easy crossover to acting, and he enjoyed a respectable level of success doing live theater, voiceovers and television commercials. He recounts with amusement the time a fellow passenger onboard a plane exclaimed, “You’re the dancing crab!” after recognizing him from a series of television commercials he’d starred in for Sea Galley restaurants, a Northwest-based seafood chain.

“She asked me to autograph her barf bag!” he recalls. “When she saw what my name was, she said, ‘You’re kidding me! You’re a dancing crab and a Rockefeller?’”

At 31, Rockefeller made an about face and left the performing arts for the corporate world. “I’d done it. I’d had a great time. But it was time to do something else,” says Rockefeller, who went to work in Bank of America’s corporate philanthropy division.

But just a year later, he left that career for a job at Universal Studios. “I had a pretty mundane title, general services manager, and my responsibilities were mostly administrative, but it was fantastic training for what I would do later. I learned about the power of imagery and storytelling.”

After seven years at Universal, Rockefeller decided, yet again, that it was time to do something different. He’d always enjoyed writing and was a voracious reader, so he became a script consultant specializing in the accurate depiction of people dealing with drug and alcohol addiction on television and film.

“My doctoral degree was in human science, and I was fascinated by the study of human addictions and in knowing why people do what they do,” says Rockefeller, who also serves on the board of the Newport Beach Arts Council.

When a friend told him about a teaching position available at UC Irvine’s Extension Education, Rockefeller came up with an idea for a class that would incorporate his “insatiable curiosity about what makes people tick” with a strong motivational message to constantly strive to improve oneself.

Called Career Coaching: Thriving in a Career Transition, the class focused on acquiring new life skills and using guided imagery to overcome fear and self-doubt. It was an immediate hit with adults wanting to make mid-life career and personal life...
changes. He followed this up with a class called *Bam! Kick Your Life Up a Notch.*

"I taught students how to think more creatively and how to use the power of their imagination to help them accomplish their goals," says Rockefeller, who was tapped for the job of director when his predecessor left the post in 2001.

Practicing what he has taught others, he visualized writing his own book for years. Last year, he gave a talk on guided imagery to the California Psychological Association at its annual conference in Pasadena. Afterward, the owner of New Harbinger Publishing Company approached him and asked if he'd be interested in writing a book.

In March 2007, *Visualize Confidence: How to Use Guided Imagery to Overcome Self-Doubt* will hit bookstores. One month later, *Mind-Body Medicine: The Art of Whole Person Healthcare* comes out, which Rockefeller is co-editing. He sees it as yet another interconnected dot in his life so far.

"I've always been interested in nonverbal communication and visual imagery. That's why I became a dancer—to express myself through movement. I can 'hear' energy," he says, attributing his heightened sense of awareness to being 85 percent hearing impaired. (Both of his two sisters are hearing impaired, as was his late father.)

In his job as director, he tries to get adults of all ages to tap into their own inner energy and discover what it is that they truly want to do. "People come to me for help in figuring out what it is they want to do in the next chapter of their lives," he says. "I ask them to complete this sentence: 'You know, I've always wanted to—' I tell them to let their imagination run wild when they answer."

As for his own future, Rockefeller envisions writing more books, becoming active in Newport Beach politics and continuing his work on the board of the Newport Beach Film Festival. He also wants to expand the extension program to reach more people.

"There's a passage I read by Marianne Williamson that I just love," he says. "It goes something like this: 'Who are you not to be fantastic? Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We are here to shine and as we shine, we help other people to shine.' Isn't that so great? Those are words that I live my life by."

—Sharon Tetrault is a freelance writer from Balboa Island.