

LETTING GO FOR A RICHER LIFE

By Megan Raphael, Director of Club Programs

Remember when you were a kid playing on the monkey bars? You moved along from bar to bar, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but eventually you came to the end. At times, though, it was more challenging and there you were, dangling from a bar, knowing you had to muster up your courage and strength to grab the next one if you wanted to progress. It's been said, *"Downsizing is much like crossing monkey bars. You have to let go at some point to move forward."*

Letting go is the most difficult part of moving and downsizing, even if the end result is one of the best decisions you've ever made. There probably isn't a person alive who has successfully downsized that wouldn't say the process of saying goodbye to belongings, places and people truly tested their resolve and spirit.

As children both Sue and Jim had spent summers on a Northern Michigan lake and always talked about living in Traverse City one day. When they retired several years ago they jumped at the chance to finally realize their dream and purchased a spacious waterfront home. They spent many happy times enjoying their beach and savoring the beautiful sunsets. The only cloud in their otherwise sunny life was the ever-increasing time they had to spend on yard work and house maintenance, all of which kept them from being able to truly enjoy their dream life. After many discussions they decided it was time to move into a smaller place, but where to start? The idea of downsizing all their furniture, books, and collections of special knick-knacks was overwhelming.

Downsizing is difficult because we are reviewing our lives in the process. Every object is judged and a decision must be made about its importance to us now. This can be emotionally, mentally and physically exhausting.

In their new book, *Moving On: A Practical guide to Downsizing the Family Home*, authors and professional organizers Linda Hetzer and Janet Hulstrand say it's not uncommon for people to postpone moving out of their homes simply because the prospect of dealing with all their accumulated stuff is just too daunting. *"It keeps people from moving even when they know that is the best thing for them to do."* In working with many clients Hetzer and Hulstrand quickly discovered that, *"Some items have special sentimental meaning; perhaps they represent unfinished business or an unfulfilled dream of some kind, or memories of wonderful times and people. This can make letting go really hard to do."*

Sue and Jim, though initially overwhelmed by the job that lay ahead in 'getting rid of stuff', were committed to downsizing because it was going to allow them to realize their vision for a new future. They knew they had had a good life in their home, but it didn't fit them any longer; they wanted to be free of household chores and responsibilities so they could do the things they really wanted to do. So with new dreams of time and energy to bike, be involved in community activities, see shows and plays downtown, etc. they doggedly continued sorting and packing. Though it was still difficult letting go of items that had strong sentimental memories attached to them, their vision pulled them through. They made a vow to only keep items they truly cared about and that continued to have meaning for them.

Ellen Goodman, Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and author of numerous books of fiction and memoir, shared this wisdom, *"I have learned that what the next generation will value most is not what we owned but the evidence of who we were and the tales of how we loved."*

All too often we avoid downsizing because we are convinced our treasures will mean as much to other family members as they mean to us, and that the objects will keep our memory alive. Sue admitted she was initially resistant to letting go of family heirlooms until she learned from her kids that the truth was, they really did not want them; the pieces didn't fit with their décor or they simply did not have a strong attachment to them. They assured her they would always remember her and honor her life even without the furniture.

Letting go in order to move forward is a lifelong process, requiring great courage and determination, with downsizing one of the most challenging. But is the emotional, physical and mental toll worth it?

Sue and Jim, like countless others who have downsized into smaller homes, condos and senior living communities, say the payoff is tremendous. They wish they had done it much sooner because it has freed them up to live a new, reimagined life. They now have time and energy to truly enjoy the activities they want to be engaged in and people they want to be involved with. Both are focused on creating their future, rather than hanging on to the past. Making the transition to a smaller residence has given them greater opportunities to expand their interests, build new skills, and develop deeper relationships. Without the burdens of tending to a yard, shoveling snow or doing home repairs, they have been able to travel, get more exercise, and in general, enjoy life more.

"Imagine how much richer life would be if we made room for new opportunities. Imagine if we stepped out from under the being weighed down with all the miscellaneous stuff we have acquired over the years. Imagine how much vitality we could regain if we shifted our view from the past and looked ahead to new choices available to us for living a meaningful life." Megan Raphael

