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Desert Leaf

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Releasing the 'Stuff' but Keeping the Memories

By Jan Henrikson

Two winters ago, my sisters and I had six weeks to empty our childhood home of generations of belongings before the new buyer moved in.

We sorted through love letters our dad recorded on vinyl and mailed to our mom during WWII, journals from both sides of the family, nearly every cartoon our professional cartoonist father drew from age 11 until 91. Not to mention clothes, jewelry, 50-year-old canceled checks — everything that symbolized full, long lives.

It was heartbreaking, life-affirming and confusing all at once. How could my sisters and I be the ones to decree what would happen to things our parents, grandparents and great-greats had so lovingly preserved for hundreds of years? We had what seemed like seconds to decide what would be saved for future generations or lost forever.

Like us, our fellow baby boomers — roughly 76 million strong — are inheriting an avalanche of possessions from our Depression-era parents.

"Theirs was a frugal, practical generation. They didn't let go of anything," says Julie Hall, the "Estate Lady" and author of *The Boomer Burden: Dealing With Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff*. "They held onto scraps of leather, shoe strings, rubber bands."

Older boomers (born between 1946 and 1951) tend to be fiercely loyal. Like their parents, they equate "success" with "things" and have trouble letting things go. Although younger boomers (born between 1959 and 1964) are still loyal, they are beginning to downsize. Middle boomers (1952–1958), in Hall's opinion, are a blend of both.

And Generations X and Y? "We're not in the 20th century anymore," says Hall, who has more than 20 years of experience helping people compassionately navigate their way through family heirlooms. "Our children and grandchildren aren't interested in what we have. They don't want the crystal. They don't want the silver."

And the mahogany furniture that was so coveted once upon a time? "Think of your grandma's china hutch painted



purple or lime green. That's what I'm seeing," says Hall.

With Depression-era parents dying, flooding the market with belongings, boomers downsizing and the younger generations preferring to acquire things virtually versus physically, what are we to do with all the stuff? How do you decide what to keep? Toss? Donate?

First, scream or take a deep breath. Then, claim what you love. What lights you up? Feels alive? It doesn't matter if it makes sense to anyone else. "The heart wants what it wants," as Emily Dickinson wrote.

When Hall's mom died, the daughter wanted family photos. "I didn't want to forget how blue her eyes were," she recalls. She also grabbed a little perfume bottle — a gold-tone frog — she had, at age 10, given her mom, and her mom had saved it. "I paid a dollar for it at an outlet store in New York," says Hall. "That very special emotional connection does not have to be a high-dollar heirloom. Now when I look at it, I just smile."

Diane Russell knew she wanted an ornate secretary that belonged to her Scandinavian immigrant great-grandparents in the early 1900s the first time she saw it. In high school, after her grandma's death, she begged her parents to

move it to their house. Finally, 33 years later, at 50 years old, Russell was allowed to ship it to her own home, where she cherishes its display of other family treasures.

If you love something, you'll probably find a way to give it new life. Hall's assistant was one of nine children who gave their dad a tie for every birthday and holiday. His ties aren't languishing in a drawer; they've been used to make a quilt. Likewise, Alison Hershey Manes used her grandfather's favorite shirts to make quilts for her family. She found it so moving that she now crafts heirloom quilts and pillows for others and sells them on etsy.com.

Harriet Monroe captured the flavors of her family tree by turning into a cookbook the recipes her grandma inherited from her mother and grandmother (www.Grandmashomebakery.com published with blurb.com). "Our hearts and minds met through the creativity of cooking," Monroe says about the grandma who inspired her granddaughter's career as a personal chef.

If you adore flowers, you may wish to plant some of Mom's or Dad's bulbs in your own garden. "It's a sweet way to remember someone," says Hall, whose house is rich in irises and tiger lilies from the gardens of clients who have passed on.

Need some creative juice? Search "Remodel & Recycle Family Heirlooms" on Pinterest.

Honor what you love. And the rest? Release, release, release

may well be the solution. The first thing to go? It may be guilt.

When faced with a beloved's collection, say, of baseball cards, beer steins or china dogs, people balk and admit, "This was my dad's favorite. My mom always loved this. But I never got into it," explains Laura Lamb, of The Girls Estate Sales, in Tucson. "It hurts them to sell something that was special to their parents."

"You know what you need?" Hall asks clients. "Permission to let go." When they start crying, she reassures them that their loved ones don't care about their personal property anymore: "They just want you to make good decisions."

Sometimes the good decision is matching a collection with a private collector. Hall once discovered a 1910 Louis Vuitton steamer trunk thrown in the trash by an uninterested inheritee. It was filled with WWII memorabilia. "I don't care about this crap," he told Hall.

"I can probably get you eight grand for this crap," she responded. "Would that change your mind?"

Hall was able to get it into the hands of a private collector passionate about keeping history alive. (Historical societies and university libraries are another option.)

Let things go, she iterates, but know their value before you give them to a neighbor who wants a memento of your mother's that turns out to be a \$25,000 vase.

"If you are working with an estate-sale company, consult with them early as to what to keep and what to release," advises Catherine Baron, owner of Catherine's Estates and Appraisals, in Tucson. "We retrieved a 1930s vintage Halloween papier mache jack-o'-lantern from the trash. The homeowners were trying to be "helpful" and cleaning things out of the garage. We ended up selling the prize pumpkin for \$350 at the sale. Talk about something that could have been very scary!"

Because "a lot of people are willing to sell you their opinions," Lamb suggests finding a certified appraiser. Need a recommendation? Call your insurance company.

In terms of value, the worst thing to do, agree Hall and Lamb, is to hire a company that buys everything in the house for one price, say, \$500. However, there are circumstances when "value" is defined by context.

"In an ideal world you would have months to liquidate grandma's possessions; with time, you would maximize the return on the goods sold," explains Baron. "But the reality may be that grandma has been gradually downsizing for years and passes away on the 27th of the month at an assist-



ed-living facility. Her space is filled with her 'stuff,' valued at, for example, \$2,000. If you don't get those items out by the first of the next month, you could be looking at trouble to the tune of a rental fee of \$5,000 or more.

"The bottom line is that each estate settlement is unique, and there is a place for forced liquidations and buyouts. Sometimes the magic is not in making things disappear to be replaced by a big pile of money. Sometimes the magic is just in making things disappear. The correct approach is what helps the family cope during a very stressful time."

And, while you're busy blessing and releasing, be

mindful of our oldest ancestor, our most important family heirloom: the Earth, something future generations will definitely inherit.

“We need to be concerned about our landfills,” says Hall. Instead of filling up dumpsters with things that the heart no longer wants, you can donate everything — from bicycles to eyeglasses.

If it feels too overwhelming to track down charities or recipients for your goods, ask a friend to help. With its comprehensive directory of organizations that accept donations, TucsonCleanandBeautiful.com makes it easier for Tucson/Pima County residents to let go.

Finally, inventory your own stuff. Karen Callan’s Grandma Rosa loved finding new homes for her heirlooms. “As she grew older, she accepted the fact that her time was winding down, so anyone who expressed an equal love of one of

her pieces left her home with it in his or her arms. A table, a lamp, a bowl...size didn’t matter. Off it went with the new owner,” Callan writes in her book, *Just in Time*.

Hall adds: “One of the very best gifts... you could leave your loved ones, is to begin the process of whittling down and clearing out, even if you have to hire help, or find trustworthy volunteers to do it. You may not be there to see the relief and gratitude on their faces, but take it from one who knows: They will truly appreciate your gift...and your legacy will live on.” ■



A Home for Every Heirloom

Before you label something too old, worn, or unusual to be donated, check with local charities, schools, hospitals, churches, friends. Those frayed towels? Pet shelters need them for their cats and dogs. Your great uncle’s clarinet? Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation (www.mhopus.org) accepts gently used band and orchestral instruments for underfunded music programs nationwide. Even packing peanuts have somewhere to go: UPS stores, PakMail and Staples welcome them. Call the 24-hour automated Peanut Hotline at 800-828-2214 for other options, or visit www.loosefillpackaging.com.

If you want to keep and preserve family treasures, the Library of Congress offers tips and suggestions at www.loc.gov/preservation/family/.

Other resources that will offer a welcoming reception for your family’s “stuff” include, among others:

- The Freecycle Network (www.freecycle.org). It’s a grassroots, nonprofit movement of people exchanging stuff for free. Moderated by local volunteers. Free membership. Find and release everything from hanging file folders to kayaks.
- Tucson Clean & Beautiful provides a comprehensive directory (tucsoncleanandbeautiful.org/recycling-education/

recycling-directory/) for recycling and waste reduction for Tucson/Pima County area residents. Email recycle@tucsonaz.gov or call 520-791-5000.

- Habitat for Humanity–HabiStore Home Improvement Center (www.Habitattucson.org) accepts gently used furniture and other household items, at 935 W. Grant Road. Items too big for your car? Call (520) 889-7200 to arrange a pickup.
- Set your old computers free via the The Dell Reconnect Program. Drop off any brand computer to Goodwill (www.goodwill.org) for recycling. (Be sure its hard drive is wiped clean before donation.)
- National Cristina Foundation (www.cristina.org) accepts donated desktops, notebooks, printers and software, which it offers to people with disabilities or economic disadvantages.
- Consumer electronics are accepted by Best Buy (www.bestbuy.com), which recycles televisions, computers and accessories, cell phones, printer cartridges and small household appliances.
- Archive Advantage (www.archiveadvantage.com, 520-576-7886) will convert photos, videos and slides to digital format for a fee. 3573 East Sunrise Dr., Ste. 209 Tucson, AZ 85718

Jan Henrikson is a local freelance writer.

Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

The Estate Lady

6420-A1 Rea Road, Suite #135
Charlotte, NC 28277-4529
(704) 543-1051



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