

Kathleen Martin is an attorney with O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C., and a newspaper columnist for The Mercury, which gave permission for this article to be reprinted.

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“Why won’t my family take my stuff?” lament downsizing adults

A recent article in The New York Times addresses the issue of aging adults who are downsizing for various reasons and find that their children or other close relatives do not want the “stuff” that they have been saving for them. Baby boomers are growing older, and as they move to smaller homes, assisted living facilities, or other living situations, the volume of family heirlooms, prized china and silver, precious furnishings, and other keepsakes will continue to grow. The dilemma is that the older adult’s kin simply do not want the items that the older adult must part with to move on. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/your-money/aging-parents-with-lots-of-stuff-and-children-who-dont-want-it.html?mcubz=3>).

The author of this article gave several specific examples of families facing this dilemma. Tena Bluhm, 76 and her 77 year old husband, Ray, downsized from a 3,000 square foot home with three floors to a single-story, 1,400 square foot living space. Their two adult children took a handful of items but were not interested in “the china and the silver and the crystal” this generation’s “hallmarks of a properly furnished, middle-class home.” Americans, after World War II began a competitive accumulation of material goods, “a cornerstone of the American dream.” Juliet B. Schor, a Boston College sociologist wrote in her 1998 book, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* that “Americans spent to keep up with the Joneses, using their possessions to make the statement that they were not failing in their careers.” Today, however, for many reasons, young adults consider household goods temporary or disposable and prefer goods from Target and IKEA rather than inheriting them from parents or grandparents.

Mary Kay Buysse is the Executive Director of the National Association of the Senior Move Managers, a professional organization of moving specialists who help older people downsize. She is quoted in the article as saying that “This is the first time we’re seeing a kink in the chain of passing down memories from one generation to another.” As a result, the senior move management industry has experienced unprecedented growth in recent years. But even these professionals are having difficulty disposing of the excess once the children have taken a few items, and the items slated for the next home are culled out. Charities also are feeling overwhelmed by the growing inventory of household goods being delivered to them.

One reason is changing tastes in furnishings and household items. An antiques appraiser in Mystic, Connecticut credits this to the popularity of the English country look in the 1990’s (collections, chintz, rich and lavish look) which gave way in the 2000’s when “clutter was out, minimalism was in.” And Millennials are less inclined to take parents’ and grandparents’ household goods as they simply have no place for them.

Mrs. Bluhm decided to donate treasured possessions that she no longer could keep to charitable organizations. She says that she has “left the memories attached to them” and hopes that “someone who really wanted them would purchase them.” This is something to keep in mind as we accumulate “stuff” in our homes; what is going to happen to it when we need to leave?