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Emotional housecleaning: Going through parents' belongings is often a bittersweet task

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DETROIT _ It's been nine years this month since Helen B. Love's mother died, 13 since her dad passed, and she still hasn't cleared out all their stuff. What she hasn't given away to friends, relatives and charity, she has stored in her home in Detroit and in a family cottage.

"Striking the balance between dealing with the stuff and feeling good about what happens to it is everyone's issue _ whether the stuff gets trashed, goes to charity, or is recycled," says Love, 62, who produces "The Senior Solution," a radio show for the Detroit Area Agency on Aging (10 to 11 a.m. Saturdays on WGPR-FM 107.5.)

As Baby Boomers age, they face the often monumental task of cleaning out the belongings of parents who have either passed away or become too ill to live alone. The task can be physically and emotionally exhausting and result in a range of feelings _ from bittersweet memories of times spent together to anger and resentment about being left with such a tremendous chore.

Every day, approximately 4,800 boomers lose a parent, according to Julie Hall, an estate liquidator and author of "The Boomer Burden: Dealing With Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff" (Thomas Nelson, \$14.99).

"A lot of these parents were part of the Depression generation so they didn't throw much away," says Hall. "It's not just big stuff. I've gone through homes where people have saved hundreds of rubber bands, paper clips and Cool Whip containers. They have so much stuff that the children are at a complete loss about what to do."

It can lead to heated battles between siblings and relatives, Hall says. "I've seen children fighting over Tupperware. Sometimes in their haste to just empty the house right away they don't take the necessary time, and end up throwing away or giving away valuable items."

Love came up with a clever way to keep all 200 of her father's ties, creating heart-shaped wall hangings from them.

"I cherish them because they're a way to honor both parents, since my mom (Alma) always picked my dad's ties," says Love. "So it became a way to keep something that's a part of both of them and give it new life."

For Victoria Ragland of Detroit, clearing out her father's stuff seems like an endless task.

"My father passed in 2004 and I'm still cleaning out the house," says Ragland, 57, whose mom died in 1995.

"My dad was 90 and he never threw anything away," she says of Carl Ragland, an avid golfer, bowler, square dancer and photographer who retired from General Motors in 1975.

"So I found 25 years' worth of social security statements, all kinds of golfing equipment and clothing, square dancing _ everything," she says. "I found my report card _ from kindergarten."

"I blew out two shredders trying to get rid of his papers," says Ragland, a Borders Book saleswoman. "Then eventually I did what a friend of mine suggested I do _ what she did: I burned the rest in a barbecue pit."

Ragland also gave a lot of things away to her father's friends and sold some to vintage stores, but she still found herself with loads of stuff. "I tell all my friends you need to start thinking about it and doing it while your parents are alive," she says.

Ragland has the right idea, experts say.

When the parent, while alive, specifically dictates in writing where everything is to go, it's a lot easier for the children _ and usually results in fewer fights between siblings and relatives.

"Kids can get ugly, to be polite," says Theresa Brune, founder of Simplify It LLC in West Bloomfield, Mich. "In the best situations, the children get together and enjoy it; in the worst, it tears a family apart."

Hall agrees.

"It happens first and foremost because adult children and parents don't have that conversation about end-of-life care and what they'd like to bequeath to others," she says. "The children are afraid to do it because they don't want to face it and the adult parent doesn't want to talk about it either. So many parents think, 'Oh my children are smart; they can handle it; they'll figure it out.'"

Brune says adult children should be paring down their parents' stuff while they're living, not waiting until they're gone.

"I have an 86-year-old client and we were going through things that were her mother's," says Brune.

But some adult children get so overwhelmed by the clearing-out task, they get stuck.

Consider Linda Moragne, 52, of Oak Park, Mich., and her three sisters. Their mother, Martha Moragne, died in December 2005, and most of her belongings are still where she left them.

"We can't let go," Moragne says. "Removing them would make us feel like we're getting rid of her."

Clinical psychologist Peter Lichtenberg, who directs Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology, says an inability to go through and sort through parents' belongings may signal the need for grief counseling to help cope with the acute sense of loss.

"Coming face-to-face with all the possessions that have so much meaning not only to the parents, but to the children can be such a powerful emotional experience," he says.

Ideally, the clearing-out process is a healing time for siblings to go through and reminisce. Holding on to particular items that have special meaning or value is a good way to honor a loved one's memory, Lichtenberg says.

For the most part, that's what LaDonna Dean, 53, has done. Her mother, Geraldine Brooks, died in August. Dean gave most of her mom's furniture to residents of a senior citizens complex where Brooks last lived. Her basement stores boxes of items yet to be distributed.

But a curio, her mother's glasses and her mom's favorite chair _ white satin with matching ottoman _ are now treasured pieces in Dean's Detroit home.

"That was the chair she sat in all the time to watch television and to read her Bible," says Dean, an administrative assistant at Adult Well-Being Services in Detroit. "Sometimes I just have to sit there and it makes me feel her there with me."

PARING DOWN

Start having conversations with your parents while they're physically and mentally well about distributing

their belongings.

Begin clearing out stuff on a regular basis.

Have your parents write down where they specifically want their possessions to go.

Siblings should go through the home together to select items they want if distribution has not already been spelled out.

Before beginning major cleaning, contact the local government agency to request a giant Dumpster or refuse hauling service.

Shred documents that could be used for identity theft, such as old tax bills, financial records and health papers.

Before selling items or donating them to charity, consider having them professionally appraised.

Separate into piles, such as holding for family, donating to relatives, giving to a shelter.

Source: Julie Hall, Theresa Shane.

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