

WHEN YOUR PARENTS NEED A HELPING HAND

By Marie Bradby

One of the hardest things to see in life is your parents move from independent living to needing constant help as their health declines.

It's often a long, tough road for everyone involved. One of the biggest problems is figuring out when to have "the conversation" with them about moving from their home. The second issue is getting your parent to accept help, whether in the home or in a senior facility. The third is pulling off the physical move, which often involves downsizing decades worth of accumulation.

Chris Summerfield shares her story of helping

to care for her parents and ultimately moving them to assisted care. Chris is a registered nurse and Women's Health community education coordinator with Baptist Health Louisville. Hers is a story of dedica-

tion that gives insight into the communication, patience, awareness, and decision-making required to support the people who gave us life.

PAGE 24>>



Chris Summerfield had been worried about her father for a while. He had vascular dementia, and she was concerned for his safety and the safety of her mother, who was caring for him.

When her parents — Maxine and Billy Keene — were in their late 70s, she had talked them into moving out of their large five-bedroom house in the countryside into a smaller home in Bardstown because her father could no longer drive.

Now, in their 80s, her father's short-term memory had really declined. "There were little hints along the way," she says. "Folks like my dad who were so smart, know they should know things. If you asked, 'What did you have for breakfast?' they will say: 'The usual.' If you ask them what the usual is, they can't tell you."

Chris, who lives in Louisville, and her siblings — two in Bardstown, one in Florida — were all concerned as their father declined. "One night he leaned over the kitchen table and asked Mom who she was," Chris remembers.

The first talk of many

She and her siblings tried to talk to their mother about moving their dad into assisted living, but Mrs. Keene was adamant — she could handle her husband and take care of him.

"That was very fearful for me," Chris says. "I was worried. Dad hadn't been violent, but when one has a diagnosis of dementia they are no longer the person they used to be. When someone can't reason or remember, they can't be trusted. For the safety of the caregivers and themselves, that's when conversations had to begin to get help for Dad's care."

The wait

The Keenes continued to resist. "They didn't feel they needed that

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level of care," Chris says.

"It took a long time, about a year, to move my father into assisted living. My mom put up resistance. 'No, we don't need to move your dad,' Mrs. Keene said. 'It will be just fine. He would never hurt me.'

"We had many conversations over a long period of time until Mom got to the point of 'this is too much.' Dad got very paranoid. It was part of the dementia. He thought people were coming into the house and stealing things.

"For Mom, the decision that he had to go was when he got up in the middle of the night and said somebody had moved the bathroom. That was the straw that broke the camel's back."

The decision

"When he could not take basic care of himself, that was enough for Mom," Chris says. Her father was in his mid 80s, her mother only a few years younger.

Before the move, her brother took their dad to see his family physician. Her brother told the doctor that their dad couldn't stay home anymore. 'It's wearing mom out,' he said. It was also wearing out her brother and Chris' sister, who lived nearby. "The physician told Dad, 'Why don't we send you to a place to help monitor your medication?' Dad loved his doctor so he thought that was OK."

The move

The family feels lucky that there

was an opening in assisted living at a nursing home in Bardstown, where he got proper medical care, nutrition, interaction with others, and was in a safe environment, Chris says. He was moved there within two days. It took three of them to make it happen. They were also grateful for the long-term care insurance.

"Once we got him to assisted living, Mom got to do things like go out to lunch, go shopping, and she didn't have to worry about Dad. It was a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week job to care for him." Chris only wishes they could have moved their dad sooner.

The acceptance

In only a few weeks, Mr. Keene couldn't even remember living at home. "It was interesting to see him lose decades," Chris says. "He couldn't remember being married, having four children, or grandchildren." At one point, he couldn't remember who Chris was. "Why do you keep calling me Dad?" he asked. "It made me sad because family was so important to him."

Chris says the hardest thing was "putting a loved one with no short-term memory in the care of someone that you don't know. It's tough stuff. Once Dad was there, he was content. He was in clean clothes. He was up and dressed every day, there were activities going on. You could see he was well cared for. It put our mind at ease."

After a severe urinary tract infection, Mr. Keene was hospitalized in Louisville and moved to the memory care unit at the Masonic Home. "When we got Dad to the Masonic Home with psychiatry and a gerontologist, he was calmer and more alert" because his medicine was adjusted, Chris says. She was relieved. He lived there for about three years and passed in his early 90s.

After a few years of independence, Mrs. Keene's health declined because

of arthritis and osteoporosis. She was 91. “She was afraid to be by herself. Her physical issues became so great that she could not do the basic activities of daily living — getting up, getting dressed, good nutrition,” Chris says.

After a series of falls and a hospitalization, surgery, and rehab, Mrs. Keene told her daughter, ‘I don’t think I can ever go home.’ I said, ‘Mom, I think that is a very good plan.’ We were fortunate that there was a facility in Bardstown she could go to. She was pretty happy — she had her great big TV and her own room, and they would bring her breakfast in bed.

“It takes a good two to four weeks for folks to get used to their new home. They have to grieve over the loss of their home, to make new friends, and to adjust to a new schedule,” Chris says.

One day, her mother lamented the move and complained. “My brother said, ‘Mom, this is where you’re going to live, so you might as well get happy about it.’ ”

The aftermath

Both of her parents have passed on. But because of her experience, Chris wants others to know that it’s important to visit your parents in person in their home, rather keeping up with their health and needs by phone. You need to see what’s rotting in the refrigerator, how they smell, if they are eating properly, if they are brushing their teeth, if they are bathing, if they are paying the bills, she says.

Because she and her siblings had to dispose of their parent’s belongings, it has also pushed her to think about not accumulating a lot of things and to think about her own mortality. She and her husband plan to downsize when they retire and move to a senior community with independent and dependent care. They also want that community to be near their children.

“These are going to be incredibly hard conversations and be incredibly stressful times for all the family because it’s taking away somebody’s independence,” Chris says.

IF YOU HAVE TO MAKE A BIG MOVE

While taking care of your parents might span years, there are people available to do the hard work of getting them moved out of their homes and into senior care.

Barbara Morris, 70, is founder of Smooth Transitions, a senior move management company that helps prepare, sort, pack, and move your loved one’s belongings. Active adults also use her company to help them downsize and move.

Barbara no longer does the hands-on work; she trains new licensees for her 24-year-old company, which now has licensees in 26 states. She’s a founding member of the National Association of Senior Move Managers.

Barbara worked for 20 years in public relations for Methodist Evangelical Hospital, which merged with Norton Hospital, and she says she literally fell into the industry. “When a friend of the family passed,” Barbara says, “I disbursed the things in his home.”

Then, “my mother-in-law made a move from her home to a retirement community in the Forum,” Barbara says. “People told her: ‘It was easy for you to move, because you had your children (son and daughter-in-law) to help.’ But not everyone has children, or their children aren’t in town, or the children are here but working full time and won’t want to spend every night and weekend in mom’s attic and garage.”

So, in 1995, her company was born. “Filling a need was the bottom line,” she says. “I went room to room helping people decide what to move, making the moving arrangements, packing, unpacking, telling them where to put the sofa, getting the bed made, the toiletries put away, the kitchen organized, and setting up the TV remote and the coffee maker. In some cases, we go back and ship items to family members, or get things sold or trashed.”

When the decision is made, clients or their children call Barbara and typically say, “We’re going to make a move to Treyton Oak or Brownsboro Park and we don’t know where to begin.”

“We give a free consultation, assess the project, find out what they need, what we can do, what they can do, and put the move on the calendar.

“We evaluate every job and give them an estimate, an hourly rate,” she says. “The national average is about \$2,000 to \$2,500, not including the mover. Family members or clients can do parts or we can do it all.”

Barbara says clients should plan as far in advance as they can. After a plan is in place, Smooth Transitions can get a client moved out of a small three-bedroom house into a one- or two-bedroom unit at a retirement community in just a few weeks. “It’s about the stuff and where it’s going.”



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First, Smooth Transitions gets a date on the schedule of a moving company. "Movers are busier in the summer than the winter, and busier on the last week of the month than other weeks. We want to be the first move of the day."

Then the senior move managers start organizing, sorting (what to keep, sell, give away, or trash), and packing. They unpack at the new home. "We put away all the essentials. We are miracle workers," she says.

More seniors are moving today because there are more options, Barbara says. "Before, you either lived with your children or moved to a nursing home," she says. "There weren't places in between like retirement communities, patio homes, assisted living. It's not just moving anymore to a condo or apartment that's smaller where there's no social interaction. Retirement communities have activities and offer socialization. People can live full lives without cutting the grass, shoveling the

snow, or cleaning the gutters. They can interact with other people, and their life expectancy will expand."

Continuous Care Retirement Communities, like the Forum, offer independent living, assisted living, and nursing home care. When her mother-in-law could no longer stay in the villa at the Forum, she moved into their assisted living, then later to their health care where she passed, Barbara says. "She didn't have to leave the retirement environment. It's especially good for couples. When one person's health changes, they can stay on the same campus without another move and separation. You

typically don't have to drive, and you don't have to cook. What's better than that? People say they feel like they are on a cruise or vacation."

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BARBARA'S 13 TIPS FOR GETTING A SENIOR CLIENT MOVED

1 Move while you are in charge. "My mother-in-law used to say, 'Move while you are in charge, while you can decide where you want to go, what you want to do, what to take, and what will happen to your stuff.'"

Give yourself time to adjust. "At first, she didn't want to go to the dining room every night at the Forum, because she was a fabulous cook. Well, she went 360 degrees. She said, 'The nicest thing about coming here is having dinner with people every night.'"

2 Get started even if you are on a waiting list. "We help clients develop a plan of things to do so they are ready to move forward when the time comes. If you aren't ready when an opening comes, you will lose your place in line."

3 Focus on what's going to move. "Don't worry about the basement, the attic, or the guest room. Focus on what you are going to take."

4 Get professionals to help with the sorting process. "We all have so much stuff, and it paralyzes us because everything has memories. Our managers are neutral. We aren't the adult child saying, 'Mom, you don't have room for it.' We are gentle. We talk about space limitations, how to capture memories in different ways. We have no agenda."

5 Devote small amounts of time to sorting. "Take 15 minutes to an hour a week to clean out a drawer or a closet so you don't get overwhelmed."

6 Identify anything that the family might want. "That's a tough one. It involves tough love. You're making a move and you have things in the basement from your high school years, college stuff. You started a career, got married, had children, got unmarried, and proceeded to use your house as the dumping ground for your stuff and your parent's stuff. If any of this is important to you, give it to family members."

7 Dispose of the things that are left. Sell valuables. Donate anything that can't be sold but still can be used. Don't hold onto things like flower vases. Always have a donation bag going, and when charities call saying they will have a truck in your neighborhood, put out your donation."

8 Get rid of papers. "If you've kept your receipts from Byck's and Selman's and Kaufman's department stores, you can't take that blouse back anymore, because those stores are closed."

9 Give away extra clothes and accessories. "We tend to accumulate things. It could be plastic bags, shoes, scarves, slippers. When was the last time you wore a slip?"

10 Donate business and formal attire. "We are so casual these days, we don't even dress up for church. Keep one suit for a funeral or wedding. Give women's business clothes to

Dress for Success. Give men's suits to thrift stores, such as Goodwill, St. Vincent de Paul, and the Nearly New Shop."

11 Don't expect large sums of money for used furniture. "You cannot give a dining room table away today, or a hutch, or a buffet. Seniors don't have space for them; young people don't like the style, or the brown color. They don't entertain. They don't use the space the way we do."

12 Do not use a storage facility. "Storage is just prolonging a decision. You will forget what's there. The items you store aren't worth as much as the money you will perpetually pay for that unit."

13 You have to be relentless and let things go. "I lost my mother in January. All these things that I'm telling you, I'm telling myself. It's not easy."