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THEN AND NOW

JUST THE TWO OF YOU

Couples discuss how they've adjusted to life as empty-nesters

By Donna Olmstead For the Journal

Many couples make it through parenting with their marriage intact, but the transition from a family back to a couple can be a challenge.

"Empty nest is an opportunity for solving relationship problems," says psychologist Brad Richards, director of The Cognitive Behavioral Institute of Albuquerque. "Couples have the extra time to learn to enjoy each other's company without the responsibility of parenting."

The transition of adult children leaving home is a milestone that makes most parents consider their own mortality and where they stand in their life's progression, Richards explains. "It's one of those existential issues. It's a milestone that can precipitate relationship dissolution, but it can also be an opportunity for relationship consolidation."

Richards explains that men and women both feel the loss of their children leaving home, but react in different ways. "Women want more intimacy and men want a Corvette," he says, explaining that women may be more aware of their emotional changes and men may be more aware of an impulse to do something differently.

"Men are more prone to minimize their portrayal of its effect on them, but they do feel it." Women may grieve an empty nest more acutely, especially if they took pride and self-esteem from their identity as a mother, he says.

Two Albuquerque couples recently talked about how their lives changed after their children left home.

New lifestyle

Christine Hoskins of Albuquerque says adjusting to both her daughter and son living out of state has been difficult, but it's made her closer to Earl, her husband of 32 years. They do more couple things together, like special dinners and trips.

"I think I've showed it more than Earl, but he misses them, too. We're still missing our kids," she says over lunch in a Northeast Heights restaurant.

Missing them doesn't mean she isn't proud of them or hasn't come to understand their reasons for leaving New Mexico. "It's about acceptance. You can't take it personally. You have to fix it within yourself. You have to dwell on the positive. Our kids are wonderful. They're successful."

When her son and then her daughter left for college more than 10 years ago now, she accepted that they were going away for school, but she assumed they would be coming home.

Hoskins says her family has lived in New Mexico for generations and lived close to each other as a supportive family network.

Both her children lived on the East Coast for a while, but her daughter and family recently moved to Phoenix, a little closer to home.

Earl Hoskins says he always expected he would live much closer to his son and daughter after they became adults. Like his wife he comes from a close-knit New Mexico family whose members drew support from one another.

In an e-mail interview, Earl Hoskins, 56, relates how generations of men in his family always have camped and hunted together.

“So it was with Tommy (his son). He did get up with me at 3 a.m. and walk the hills every year. We never killed anything. But we bonded, which is what it is all about. ... Tommy listened to my dad tell stories of the old days around a campfire. The fun is and has always been in the camping,” he explains. “Then my son graduated from college, married and moved to Virginia. The chain is broken.”

Although he’s sad, he’s also grateful and recalls values he learned from his parents who lived through the Depression and World War II: “They taught me to learn from tragedy, but enjoy the good times. Everything is relative. I have two great children who grew up, married great people and I have two fantastic grandsons.”

And because the grandsons carry family names, the generational chain is still intact: “I named my son after my father whom I admire above all men. My son, Tommy, named his son after himself, a junior. My other grandson from my daughter Celina has my name as his middle name. I like to think that even though we are separated physically, we are still close.”

Shifting focus

In the North Valley, John and Alice Myers, married 33 years, say they are very close to their three adult children, who have finally settled in their adult lives and careers in Albuquerque. But for many years their children, now 32, 30 and 26, were off at school or traveling. Each returned for brief periods to live at home.

At first it seemed odd to fill time together that they used to spend with their children, but they say they’ve come to appreciate the space an empty nest allows them.

The first weekend after the youngest left for college they were at such loose ends, “we went to a youth soccer tournament in Los Lunas,” Alice Myers explains, chuckling. They had spent so many weekends during the years at soccer games it just seemed too unnatural to do anything else, John Myers adds.

“You know your children’s friends’ parents become your friends,” Alice Myers says, explaining that they went to cheer their friends’ children in the soccer tournament. “So much of your life is your kids.”

But life goes on, the couple says. Alice, 58, took up tennis for fitness and fun and has made new friends. John, 61, stepped up his biking and running regimen and completed the Boston Marathon this past year. Alice’s siblings and her parents live in Albuquerque, but John’s family is spread across the country.

They both have their work. John is a real estate attorney and Alice is a physical therapist.

Both say it was an interesting process to consider their options after the kids left and then decide what they wanted to do.

They decided against remodeling the house or getting a dog as a kid replacement. They practiced their Spanish and caught up on their reading. They took trips to Costa Rica and Turkey with their children.

They've adapted better than some of their friends who have become depressed after their children left home, Alice says. "It wasn't that traumatic for us. I feel really blessed. We've had 33 wonderful years (of marriage) and that makes it easier. It seems like life keeps getting easier as we go along. It gets better, instead of worse. This is just a different stage."



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL John and Alice Myers call their empty nest "just a different stage." After the last of their three children moved out, Alice got rid of the minivan and bought a used two-door convertible.