



The *Upside* to Downsizing



Steve and Bonni Cohen consolidated a home in Southampton, Long Island, and a condominium in Stuart to a single-story home in North River Shores.

FAMILIES ALONG THE TREASURE COAST ARE SEEING THE UPSIDE TO CONSOLIDATING, DECLUTTERING AND DOWNSIZING TO A SMALLER HOME. HERE, WE TAKE A LOOK AT TWO FAMILIES THAT DID JUST THAT AND HAVEN'T LOOKED BACK.

By **Suzanne Wentley**
Photography By **Ron Rosenzweig**

Look around your home, and chances are there are places you haven't taken a seat in months. When's the last time you've been upstairs? Are your children grown and prefer to stay with the grandchildren at a nearby resort instead of squeezing into those guest bedrooms that are usually vacant?

What about that collection of music boxes or the bookcase of novels you've read once? They're just giving the cleaners something to dust. If you keep buying things and find that your cabinets, dressers and shelves are filling up, you're not alone.



living in a wonderful community that has all the characteristics that we want in a wonderful, small town and still enjoying an environment that supports our small businesses.”

“Small” being the operative term.

“Ninety-seven percent of our chamber businesses,” she continues, “have three employees or less.”

Principle No. 5) Choices carry intended and unintended consequences, which usually don't arise until later.

Signs of Hobe Sound's recovery are emerging, Angela Hoffman says.

“Although some private property owners were sitting on businesses in downtown Hobe Sound during the recession,” she says, “there's now a renaissance taking place there, with shops opening and people walking around and it's great.”

“But there's still signage and improvements and core infrastructure that needs to happen and that's why the Neighborhood Advisory Committees are so key,” adds Hoffman, a county-appointed to the Hobe Sound NAC. “Community engagement is where and how creating a healthy downtown starts.”

As everyone acknowledged hearing rumors of various unincorporated areas weighing the virtues and downsides of incorporating into municipalities, conversation turned to tales of caution

from neighboring areas

“There's also been some not-successful businesses that have gone to Port St. Lucie,” Angela Hoffman says. “And even City Place caused an exodus of businesses from other popular areas in West Palm.”

Principle No. 6) Through fair trade and exchange, both parties benefit.

No one arrived under the delusion that the night's assembly – no matter how diverse, experienced or ambitious – would produce all the solutions to maintaining and strengthening Martin County's economy. But in such a picturesque retreat, after good company, fine wine, a delicious dinner and dessert of brownie cake with chocolate mousse, glazed in chocolate and mango-coulis, the key ingredients for wider success – cooperation, compromise and creativity – were recognized.

“There are plenty of big enough issues out there where the five chambers and the Business Development Board, the Economic Council, the municipalities and key community leaders should get together and share ideas,” Chuck Gerardi says.

“It's what unites us that really makes Martin County work,” Kevin Powers says.

“If we could reach out and collaborate,” adds Marsha Powers, “it could be amazing.” ■



As part of the downsizing process, the Cohens made a decision to only buy things that they could experience, rather than material possessions.

And if you're like many on the Treasure Coast, you're blessed – or is that cursed? – with more than one house. That means you've got twice the space you barely use, filled up with things you barely use and, as a result, have twice the bills you really shouldn't be paying in the first place.

Or maybe you're part of the growing number of singles. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a little more than 50 percent of American adults are single. In 1950, that number was about 22 percent. Whether you're part of a big family, in an empty nest or simply living alone, chances are you've accumulated a lifetime of stuff.

It's time to consolidate, declutter and downsize.

Throughout the nation and the Treasure Coast, there is a growing trend to go small. Suddenly, the American Dream isn't about a big house filled with purchases. Today, experiences, fine dining and travel are some of the most popular ways to enjoy surplus income. But in order to put resources toward consumable items, many have to first create space in their lives to achieve this goal.

"You question, 'What was I thinking at 30 years old, buying all this stuff?'" asks Steve Cohen, who with his wife, Bonni, consolidated a home in Southampton, Long Island, and a condominium in Stuart to a single-story home in North River Shores. "We have since made a pact that we would only buy things that we could eat, drink or experience in the future."

Like the Cohens, local couples have undertaken what becomes a major project of reducing the space they live in, and in turn they streamline their possessions. Downsizing has become especially popular for recent retirees who are now starting to plan for the next phase of life. It's not easy,











but you know what they say: “You can’t take it with you.”

FREEING YOURSELF

Overall, the sizes of homes in America are growing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average size house built in 2013 was 2,600 square feet, which is at an all-time high. In 1983, the average size was 1,725 square feet. Mega-mansions – houses that are 4,000 square feet or bigger – account for 9 percent of new homes.

So, as the real estate market in Florida rebounds, there is certainly a fair number of families who still appreciate their space. But some appreciate other things more.

“[Downsizing] is very freeing,” Bonni Cohen says. “You are really forced to take a look at your priorities in life. You have the freedom to go to a price range you can afford so you can do what you want to do.”

Five years ago, the Cohens built a new 3,000-square-foot home in North River Shores and combined their possessions from their fully furnished, bigger two-story home in the Hamptons and their 1,500-square-foot, two-bedroom/two-bath condominium in Edgewater Villas.

In designing their new home, they agreed they wanted a single-level, open floor plan that would let the kitchen be a central gathering place when they weren’t enjoying the waterfront view on the patio.

“It was important to have the inside connect to the outside with the size of the lanai and the windows,” Steve Cohen says. “It’s easy to entertain people here.”

They keep their 29-foot Windjammer Coastal 290 cruising yacht by the dock out back (it’s called “She’s On Board,” as a tribute to Bonni Cohen finally agreeing to cruise overnight with their friends in the Stuart Corinthian Yacht Club). Most days, they enjoy coffee and cocktails on their covered back patio.

Their outdoor lifestyle encouraged them to let go of a lot of the items that filled their New York home. When they were getting ready to move, they sold most things in a tag sale and gave the rest to charity. The piano was moved down, along with a few pieces of furniture, like the reupholstered chair handed down from Bonni’s grandmother. Other items that pained them to give up went to their four children who are scattered throughout the country.

“The rest you have to get in your mind that it’s just stuff,” Steve Cohen says. “The big motivation was that we wanted to travel.”

Mingled in the traditional yet tropical style of their home are a few souvenirs from their international adventures: a camel feed bag from Turkey hangs on a screen near the entryway, and art from Israel, Hawaii and Amsterdam is on the walls. Not having to worry about two properties, they say, affords them the ability to see the world.



THE 99 PERCENT RULE

Resources are everywhere on the Internet and in local bookstores for downsizing advice – and many people choose to live in homes much smaller than the Cohens.

Inspiration can come from “Tiny,” an award-winning documentary, which debuted last year, that highlights the “tiny home” movement of living in cute cottages well below 1,000 square feet. In New York City, the trend is “micro-apartments” that are around 300 square feet (and rent for about \$3,000 a month).

Locally, there are a number of personal organizers who specialize in the tricky task of helping to let go of possessions. Taking pictures of sentimental items and creating a scrapbook is



an idea for relinquishing those hard-to-part-with items.

Still, thinking long term is the best method, says Joe and Ann Day, who recently downsized into a 2,400-square-foot townhome in Mariner Sands from a 3,800-square-foot custom-built home and two rental properties.

Before moving in, the Days completely gutted and redesigned the townhome to specifically meet their needs in their daily lives.

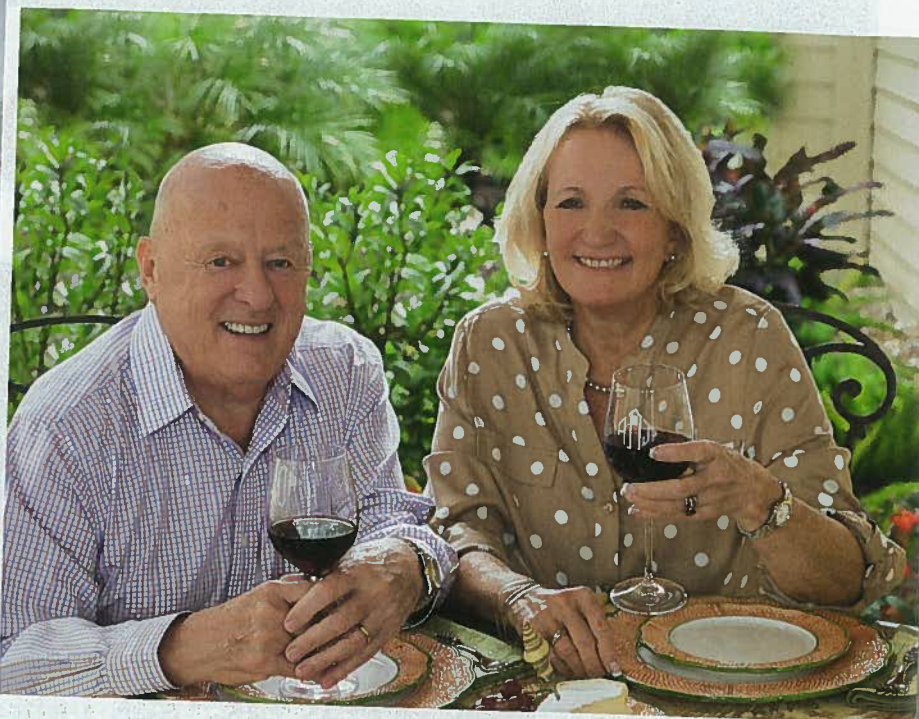
“We had the 99 percent rule: Everything had to serve the way we lived 99 percent of the time,” Ann Day says. “We didn’t change the footprint at all, but we made it all livable.”

So the large second bedroom for guests (which would be rarely used since their five children and eight grandchildren enjoy staying at the beach) was

transformed into a small exercise room and a large closet and bathroom suite connected to the master bedroom with ample, streamlined storage space that integrates into their minimalist design. The second bathroom was then renovated in blacks and grays to hide the bathtub to better resemble a powder room more appropriate for party guests.

Outside, lush landscaping and electric-powered screens surround the patio for peaceful (and bug-free) outdoor dining. Inside, they raised the ceilings, extended the kitchen’s footprint, moved the dining room to overlook the golf course and built a breakfast table on wheels with the same height and material as the countertop for buffets during holidays.

The seating areas in the living room are filled with swivel



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chairs and the patio is lined with a short wall that doubles as a bench. It all allows for the couple to host parties for 50 of their friends comfortably in their small townhome.

BEING MINDFUL

The Days spent months sketching out their dream small home design for the cottage renovation. They even visited Paris and enlisted a real estate agent, pretending they were considering buying an apartment so they could see how the French lived.

"This is our version of a Paris apartment," Joe Day says,

adding they subsequently worked with architect Mark Corson to ensure their plans could be made into reality.

With neutral fabrics and flowing white drapes reminiscent of The Delano Hotel on South Beach, the townhouse serves as a modern backdrop to the couple's extensive art collection.

They even created a special spot for the first piece of artwork they bought as a couple. A bronze statue by Bruno Catalano has a prominent, lighted spot in a cut-out window near the large foyer entrance.

Conveniently, the couple sold their other homes furnished and only kept a few special pieces. Now retired, the Days are able to spend their time helping local charities, playing golf and enjoying each other's company.

"This is our last project on our list," Joe Day says. "Other than philanthropy, we can focus inwardly for a change. We are truly retired."

It's the same for the Cohens. They also recommend spending time thinking about what to keep and how to efficiently use the space in a home based on living styles.

"It's important to find the right location and really think through what you're building. Design the house to how you live, not the other way around," Steve Cohen says. "At the end of the day, we could have used half this house. So the question is, what is the next phase?" ■



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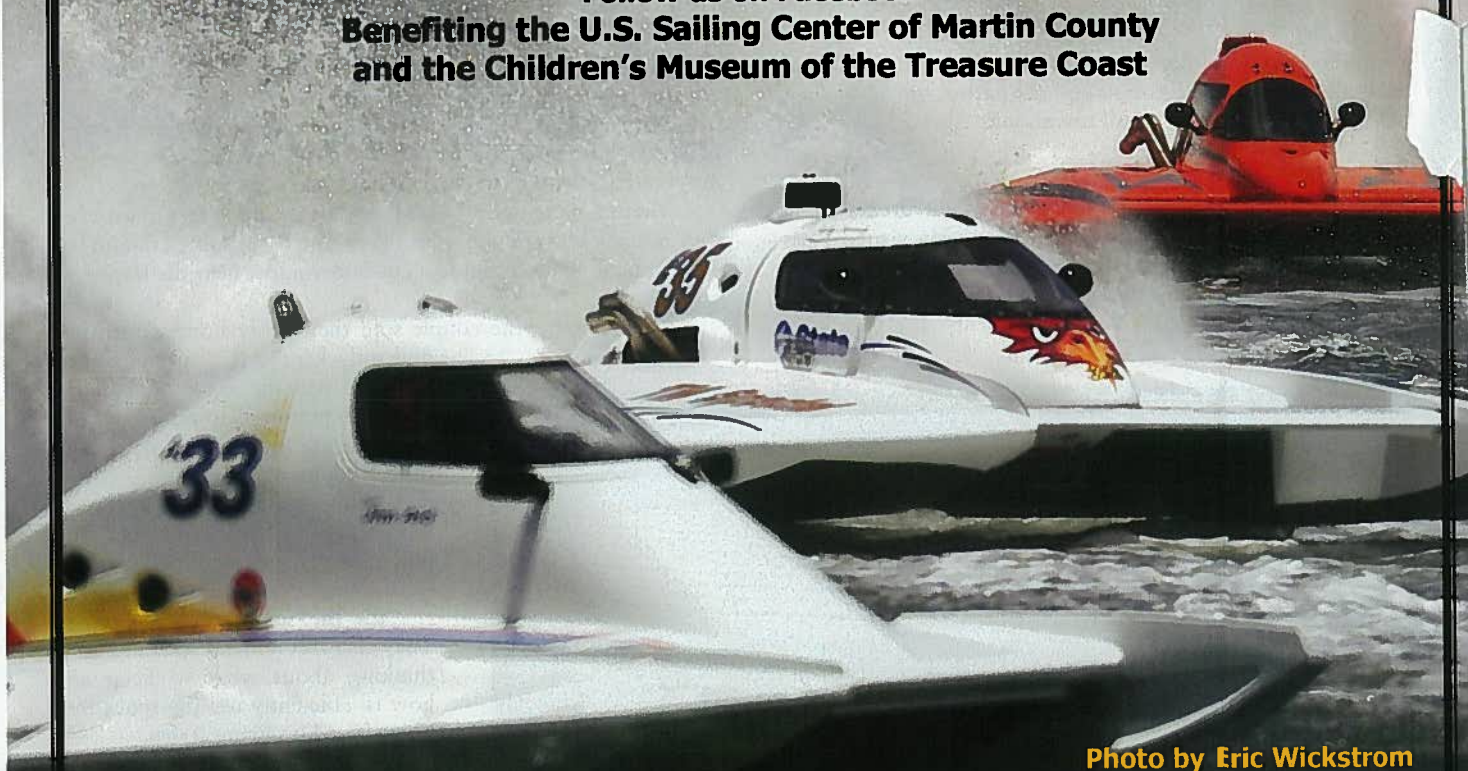


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