

REAL ESTATE



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When a lot less home is just what's needed

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Howard and Paige Bluth sold a house in McLean, Va., and downsized to a two-bedroom condo unit in Bethesda, Md. The new living arrangement makes it easier to travel, but trading 3,300 square feet for 1,200 wasn't easy. There was less room for books and art, among other things, though. Of course, there's always a place for Sebastian the dog.

When quite a lot less home is just what's needed

Empty nesters are exploring new lifestyles in spaces better suited to advanced age and diminished households

BY HARRIET EDLESON

Howard Bluth was standing outside his five-bedroom house in McLean, Va., when a man stopped in a pickup truck and asked him whether he'd like to sell it. That was three years ago, and Bluth and his wife, Paige, haven't looked back. "I sold it very quickly," said Howard Bluth, an engineer.

While selling was easy, buying required research and more time. Like many empty nesters, the Bluths found that the tough part was preparing to transition from a large home to a much smaller one — identifying their many needs and wading through a range of options to meet them.

Among the considerations: Do you want a one-level condo or a single-family house? Do you want a multilevel single-family house with the master bedroom on the first floor? Do you want a newly constructed home or an existing one? Do you want a townhouse with an elevator? Can you find a place we can afford near your family?

"We want to be near our grandchildren and our children," Howard Bluth said. All three of their grown children expect to be

living in the D.C. area, and two already do.

The Bluths looked at high-rises in downtown Bethesda, Md., not far from Northwest Washington, and at condominium apartments and townhouses throughout the area. "We didn't want the steps," Paige Bluth said. Much of what they saw was too pricey, including one-bedroom condominiums for \$600,000 to \$800,000 — more than they wanted to spend for less space than they needed.

Finally, driving around the area with daughter Liza Aronie, they became interested in the Sumner Village condominium community, not far from where Aronie and her husband and children live in Bethesda. They called Aronie's real estate agent, Caryn Krooth Gardiner of Long & Foster Real Estate, affiliated with Christie's International in Bethesda, to find out what might be available there.

Sumner Village is a long-established low-rise development on 28 wooded acres near the Capital Crescent Trail and the Shops at Sumner Place. Tennis courts, adult and children's swimming pools, and a community center are among the amenities. A gate-



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Paige Bluth, right, takes part in a bridge game in a common room at the low-rise, 28-acre Sumner Village condominium community in Bethesda, Md. Also playing are, from left, Esther Gerber, Elizabeth Guevara and Eleanor Meyer.

house controls access to the premises by automobile.

Two- and three-bedroom units were available, but the Bluths had to move quickly or risk being shut out. A three-bedroom unit in Sumner Village sold before they could make an offer. "You can't wait," Paige Bluth said. "You had to just do it."

So they settled on a two-bedroom unit. The trade-off was the patio and private garden that came with their apartment. "It's like living in the woods," she said.

But they traded 3,300 square feet for 1,200 square feet, and the downsizing wasn't easy. "I gave away so many memories and memorabilia," Paige Bluth said. They gave some of their art to their children, but items they didn't want were discarded. "It's heartbreaking, but you do it because this really is the best step," she said.

Her husband, who has an interest in history, had a library full of books that "he had to consolidate," she said.

For the Bluths, a major advantage of moving from a single-family house to a condominium was the freedom to travel without worrying so much about what was happening at home. Security will check an apartment for the owners if they are going away for an extended period. "We can pick up and go," Paige Bluth said.

In the end, a low-rise condominium building, dating to the 1970s, met their needs. "I got enough of a garden that I could at least plant rose bushes," she said.

And Howard Bluth said, "The price was just right." He declined to say how much they paid, but two-bedroom units tend to sell for just under \$500,000.

The next stage

According to a 2015 Merrill Lynch and

Age Wave national study, "Home in Retirement: More Freedom, New Choices," 64 percent of retirees say they are likely to move at least once. Thirty-seven percent already have moved; 27 percent expect they will. The top reason for moving was to be "closer to family." And some move to live in one-level homes.

"A lot of people, when they're retiring or getting older, choose to get rid of stairs," Gardiner said.

Sometimes a move to one-level living is more than a lifestyle decision; it's a health decision. Also, buyers may be looking for "something now that will work for them — or can be adapted — later," said Billy Buck, an agent with Buck & Associates in Arlington, Va.

For those who want to continue living in a single-family home, finding a suitable one-level rambler or some other one-level home can be difficult.

Even clients with an "unlimited budget" can't always find exactly what they believe they are looking for in a one-level space or a multilevel space with a built-in elevator. "It's out there, but just not in the package you're looking for," Buck said. "They're looking for one of these needle-in-a-haystack ramblers before a builder comes in and scoops it up."

Another complication is that less space doesn't necessarily mean lower price.

Although many empty nesters are hoping to move to a space that is both smaller and less expensive, some of them end up with a smaller but more expensive home because they want to remain in an expensive area, according to real estate agents.

"This could be a space downsizing but a financial upsizing," said Steve Schuck, associate broker with the Schuck Group, Long &

Foster Real Estate in Bethesda.

This can be the case when shopping new construction such as Hampden Row, The Lauren and The Darcy, luxury condominium projects in Bethesda. "It's not necessarily a price decrease as much as a lifestyle change," Gardiner said.

Aging in place

After renting for five years, Rosaleen and David King, who are in their 50s, bumped up their commitment to the Washington area last year.

The Kings, who had lived in Alpine, Calif., near San Diego, for 15 years, moved to Huntsville, Ala., for a work opportunity in 2007. They rented out their California house, not knowing if they would ever move back there.

While in Huntsville, David King landed a position as a government contractor in the Washington area, and the Kings decided to rent a home until they figured out where they wanted to live. "We wanted to think about aging in place," said Rosaleen King, an elementary school teacher at the private Beauvoir elementary school at Washington National Cathedral in Northwest Washington. "We need to be able to stay on one floor."

While they were renting — first in Northwest Washington, then in Montgomery County, Md., just north of the Friendship Heights Metro stop in the District — the Kings began thinking seriously about whether to buy in the District or in Montgomery. Knowing something about the price of houses in neighborhoods they had looked at when they first rented, they set a budget of no more than \$1 million.

"We thought we'd be here for a while," said Rosaleen King, who has grown to enjoy the area. They decided to sell their Califor-

nia house.

Their son would soon graduate from college, and their daughter was nearing the end of her high school career. So the Kings were also thinking about downsizing their living situation. After months of considering a smaller rental, they began to look for a home to buy, working with Susan Sonnesyn Brooks, an agent with Weichert Realtors in Bethesda, whom they met while looking at a prospective rental.

"When we started the search, we thought we wanted to end up in the city," Rosaleen King said, but everything proved to cost more than they wanted to spend.

At the same time, even with a \$1 million budget, it wasn't easy to find a house in the Montgomery suburbs that met their needs and appealed to them. Moving slightly farther out, but still in Bethesda, they found one that was within their budget and that they can enter without climbing stairs from the front walk or the garage.

It was a house they had seen priced at \$1.05 million in Kenwood Park, off River Road inside the Beltway, a 1950s rambler that was taking a while to sell. The house had two bedrooms on the main floor, and the owners had built an addition with a large upstairs bedroom that was suitable for the Kings' daughter.

They closed on the house at the end of September 2015, paying \$940,000, but they waited until some changes were made before moving in at the end of that October. They plan additional renovations, but, for now, they are enjoying the new neighborhood, though it's a little farther from the Metro than they'd like, at 1.8 miles.

"We've moved around a lot," Rosaleen King said. "The thought of staying put appeals to us. We finally found a place where we knew we could stay put."

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Downsizing

Things for empty nesters to do when planning to downsize:

- Figure out whether you're going to buy or sell first. Unless you can carry the cost of two or more properties at the same time, you may have to rent in between. "It's a way to do it, but you have to move twice," said Jim Toronto, an agent with McEneaney Associates, Arlington.
- Consider how far you want to live from public transportation.
- Search for properties in areas adjacent to your dream location as the prices may be lower for similar properties, Toronto said.
- Consider working with a professional — for example, an organizer or an interior designer — if you are downsizing.
- If you want to live in a townhouse, look for one with an elevator to avoid the trouble and expense of new construction later.
- If you want a single-family home, search for one that has the master bedroom and bath on the main level and that provides entry without stairs from the garage to the main level, said Susan Sonnesyn Brooks, an agent with Weichert Realtors in Bethesda.
- Consider an active adult community or independent living such as Fox Hill Residences, Maplewood Park Place, Greenspring or Ashby Ponds.