

Organized for the End

Orinda couple annually updates last wishes

By Cathy Dausman

While Patti and Roger Witalis' children each have families of their own, the Orinda couple continues to discuss "the subject" with them — the subject of their last wishes.

Each year at a family meeting, minus spouses and children, the active retirees prepare their three daughters for the eventuality of handling their final affairs, and distribute the newest financial, medical, military and legal information to each daughter, keeping the originals in a red binder.

The couple understands the importance of planning ahead. Witalis' mother-in-law passed away without leaving instructions, a "horrible expe-

rience," she recalled. And when Witalis' father was executor for her mother and four aunts, she said each estate had a dozen bank accounts needing to be straightened out.

Many times, Witalis' father attempted to broach the subject about his final wishes with her, but she said, "I couldn't bear [to discuss] it. I denied him the comfort of lifting this burden off his shoulders because of my own childhood fears." Then one day I just let him talk, Witalis said. "It was a gift I gave him."

As their children grew to adulthood, Witalis decided to ensure that her family knew the couple's final wishes well in advance.



Patti and Roger Witalis discuss what goes into their "red binder" full of end-of-life instructions for their three daughters. The family meets annually to receive updates, discuss changes and answer questions. Patti Witalis calls the binder "a living document." Photo Cathy Dausman

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"What I've learned is that it is important to do the talking before you're afraid of losing your parents," she said. True, just getting started can be emotionally difficult.

"The first [family] meeting was the toughest, and ended in lots of crying," recalled daughter Kara. "It's not easy to think about, let alone talk about your parents getting sick or dying. We all ended up blubbering. But we got through it and are now far more productive."

Her sister Kenna said she was "all for the bonding opportunity" those family meetings afforded. Their sister Katie said, "My dad, having no siblings, was able to make [estate] decisions entirely on this own, which I'm sure was a heavy weight to bear. But having siblings does not always make the process easier."

Over time, the meetings became a bit more festive, giving Witalis a chance to prepare each child's favorite food or to celebrate a birthday.

Dad plans each agenda and prepares material for inclusion in the binder.

"My dad is the meeting facilitator, as he is in real life," Kara said, "so we get a dose of his flip-chart mentality."

Each daughter is assigned a role, based on her strengths, so that responsibilities are shared. One is recording secretary; another is responsible for carrying out her parents' medical advanced directives. One has been put in charge of finances; another will manage household affairs.

The binder includes contact information for a realtor, professional associations and close family friends, birth certificates, wedding certificates, updated medical and surgical information, legal documents, bank account information and email passwords. Witalis even includes obituary information and church and religious preferences. "My uncle Joe was not buried from his parish and the priest,

who didn't know Joe, called him John through the service," she recalled sadly.

Both army veterans, copies of the Witalis' military service records, known as DD 214s, are in the binder as well. "I'm beginning to list things [including jewelry] I've promised or want to pass on to each girl and to each grandchild," she added.

Daughter Kara said she loves the excuse for the family to get together around the table like old times. "It's so nice to sit around and talk, laugh, cry. We're a funny bunch."

Asked if she plans to do the same thing in the future with her children, Kenna replied with a resounding "absolutely!"

The siblings walk away stronger as a family and tighter as sisters after each meeting, Katie said, concluding, "We three have the confidence of knowing that we will support each other in the years to come ... 'cause it's in the binder!"

How to Get the Conversation Started

Authors, financial advisors, mortuaries, health care, elder care and religious organizations all offer suggestions on starting "the talk." The following is a list of books, workbooks and websites that might be helpful:

Books and workbooks:

"Caring is Not Enough," Terry Ann Black

"My Last Wishes ... A Journal of Life, Love, Laughs & a Few Final Notes," Joy Meredith

"Get It Together: Organize Your Records So Your Family Won't Have To," Melanie Cullen

"Grant Me My Final Wish: A Personal Journal to Simplify Life's Inevitable Journey," Renata Vestevich

"When I'm Gone: Practical Notes for Those You Leave Behind," Kathleen Fraser

"What if... Workbook," Gwen W. Morgan

"You Only Die Once," Margie Jenkins

Websites:

www.caregiverslibrary.org/caregivers-resources/grp-checklists-forms.aspx

www.stfrancisgoldsboro.org/documents/onlinedocs/eol/100~Your%20Last%20Best%20Gift/Your%20Last%20Best%20Gift.pdf

www.wscpa.org/Content/files/downloads/endoflife.pdf

School Safety in a Seeming Age of Rage

... continued from page B1

One key difference is already known. While school visitors often must wear badges after signing in at Lamorinda school offices, many buildings lock down only when a threat is perceived. "If an intruder or stranger is reported ... or if there is reason to believe that a dangerous person could be on campus (i.e., an armed robbery in a nearby neighborhood)," said Nickerson, "a lockdown is called ... (students/staff inside, doors locked, window coverings drawn, lights out, silence)." Redundant systems enable staff "to communicate status during the lockdown."

Additionally, multiple buildings have outside-locking classroom doors; many will switch to locks that can be secured from the inside. OUSD is moving quickly but there is "an expense and time element," said Jaconette. AUSD is "evaluating options" with a decision "made in the coming months." Lafayette hopes it will take less than \$60,000 to upgrade all four elementary buildings plus one middle school.

Orinda, Moraga, and Lafayette districts are also collaborating with the Contra Costa County Child Abuse

Prevention Council to fund a "child safety coordinator" to teach students how to prevent bullying, child abuse, and sexual harassment.

In contrast, Orinda's private Holden High School is different, serving a student body of just 40, said Admissions Director Kristin Lamoureux. "We're kind of a special case because we're so tiny; we reside in the basement of a church. We're not a big school that needs to have metal detectors or a security guard." They do have strict anti-bullying protocols. "Kids will tell you it's a very safe school," she said. "We put a lot of emphasis on how to treat people and respectful communication."

OUSD, AUHSD, and Holden all offer counseling services. "We are fortunate," said Nickerson, "to maintain counselors at under 350 to 1. Each school also has a school psychologist and an intervention specialist, who provide support for students with emotional disturbances or mental health challenges." OUSD employs psychologists and cooperates when parents need outside help. Holden gives all students 30 minutes of adult mentoring each week to talk

about anything on their minds.

Each child needs a "go-to person that he can trust," Lamoureux said. Kids rely too often on peers when what they really need is "a sounding board," someone who has seen enough of life to be able to offer perspective. But taking on this role can be difficult — especially for parents of teens. When kids are feeling badly, she said, they just need to let it out — with someone who won't judge them. Studies show that it's often a single connection that makes the difference.

A trained therapist and mom herself, Lamoureux also urges parents to monitor their kids' social media accounts — and to talk regularly with teachers to find out what they see happening in class. (See also: www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0605/Managing-Your-Childs-Reputation-in-the-Digital-Age.html)

All three also reminded readers that school shootings, while distressing, are rare. "Obviously when they happen, they capture our deepest fears and sympathies," said Jaconette. "We go about living our daily lives knowing that there is a degree of vulnerability, but it's rare."

Help Keep Kids and Communities Safe

Several workshops on school safety and bullying are being offered in the coming month. For information, see our "Not to be Missed" section on pages B10-11. Additional informative websites include:

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence: www.bradycampaign.org

California Safe Schools Coalition: www.casafeschools.org

Protect Children Not Guns, Children's Defense Fund: www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/protect-children-not-guns-2010-report.pdf

Stopybullying.gov: www.stopbullying.gov