

Reclaiming our house as my home

I was sitting in my living room the other evening, stretched out in my favorite recliner, while I worked on a crochet project.

My 5-year-old Brittany dog Thistle was curled up like a little caterpillar in my lap. Her son, 2-year-old Quincy, was stretched out beside me in the chair. The other two dogs were nearby, sleeping soundly.

I had forgotten to turn on the television, and had turned off the music I'd been playing in the kitchen. I was content to just sit there in my silence, enjoying the company of my four dogs. As I became aware of that contentment, it dawned on me that something has truly changed for me.

My house has become my home again.

After my husband Jim died of pancreatic cancer in 2010, our house was just a roof over my head, a place to store my stuff, and a stopping off point between road trips. I would have the television on for noise, not even aware of what was playing. I didn't really "see" the house or its contents.

My heart would not let me look because there would be painful memories I didn't want to face.

I made some changes within the first year so I could tolerate being there. I had the living room redone into more of a den that reflects my personal taste, and I cleaned Jim's stuff off the counters in the kitchen and painted a bold red over the traditional pale yellow of the kitchen walls.

There were other minor changes, too, but those larger changes let me find places in my house where I could relax some.

But I never really relaxed. I found it a relief to leave for work on weekday mornings, or to pile my baggage and the dogs in the van and take off for the weekend. The return home was always bittersweet, and I dreaded stepping into the empty house.

Even when I was home, I didn't really see my surroundings. I went through the motions of living: laundry, dishes, floors, bills, taking care of the dogs — never really seeing any of it. I was unaware of what pictures were displayed around me, or what was on the walls, or the dust on the knickknacks.

I had blocked them all on some level to protect the stabs they might bring to my heart.

When I had the living room redone, it took me a long time to figure out what I wanted on the walls. The old wallpaper had been covered with photos and wall hangings of all types when Jim was alive. Photos of family and dogs and memorabilia from a happy life together all had to come down so the wallpaper could be stripped and the walls painted.

It was a relief to me to strip everything off those walls and to have a clean slate.

A few things went back up as soon as the paint dried: the painting we commissioned of our beloved Brittany dog Rosie, who had died in 2006; my birth mother's baby picture still in its original frame, which had hung in my grandparents' living room; and the pendulum wall clock Jim's sister had given to us.

All of those things make my heart smile and give me comfort. I consider the living room walls a work in progress. I add something and live into it. If the fit is good, I move on to the next thing. If it isn't, it comes down and something else goes up.

I have been doing the same thing with photos. I realized that other than the "family wall" in the hallway, the pictures I had on display were of dog sports-related accomplishments. I wondered when and how that had happened.

Now my living room photos are of family, with a couple dog photos thrown in. Some are displayed under the bow window on a coffee table that Jim had made in high school shop class. It makes me happy to be surrounded again by the beautiful faces of my family.

And it makes me happier that I now see them.

I gave away the old coffee table, end tables and sectional couch, and I bought a new stand to have next to my leather reclining love-seat. There's a Canadian rocker, *See Curves, Page C2*



JULIE HARRIS



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

Jeanne McLeod's waterfront property has been her family since she was in eighth grade. But with the family aging, the four owners are looking to sell their modest camp on Alamoosook Lake in Orland.

Last summer at the lake?

How to pass your camp or cottage into new hands

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

Doug and Jeanne McLeod left their home in Winn early one recent morning and drove to Orland to open the family camp on Alamoosook Lake. The place had been shut up tight all winter. Doug hauled the short wooden dock out from under the porch and secured it at the water's edge, waving away the black flies. Jeanne pulled some chairs out on the porch, checked the mousetraps in the kitchen and propped open the windows so the fresh spring breeze could blow through.

Watch the video
bangordailynews.com

Later, they would hook up the plastic pipe that gravity-feeds water from a nearby pond to the kitchen sink, and move the kayak out onto the greening grass near the dock. Summer's just around the corner.

The McLeods and their family have gone through the familiar rituals of opening up this little camp for decades. But this summer could be their last season at Alamoosook Lake. The beloved property is for sale.

"This camp located by the dam was built by our family in 1958 and we have maintained ownership until now," reads the post on Craigslist. "Dad died leaving it to us 4 kids. Our kids have grown and some of us have moved far away, with the camp being underused."

Jeanne McLeod, 70, said the decision to sell has been wrenching. But with her aging siblings scattered as far away as Florida and the next generation either not interested or unable to handle the financial obligations of owning the camp, she said, there really was no choice.

"The taxes, maintenance and insurance are high," she said. "We're the only ones who use it; the other three [siblings] pay and almost never get to use it."



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

Jeanne McLeod shows her modest family camp on Alamoosook Lake in Orland. McLeod is one of four "kids" who share ownership of the property. With everyone getting older, they are looking to sell the camp.

My son would love to keep it for his kids, but he can't afford it."

And so, reluctantly, the four siblings have agreed to find a buyer, hoping for a young family that will love the place as they have.

A cherished tradition challenged

All across Maine, from the wooded mountains on the western border to the open ledges of the islands off the coast, families love their seasonal homes. Large or small, elegant showplaces or rustic hideaways, these places are steeped in history and shared memories.

But, like the McLeods, many families find themselves facing difficult decisions about the future of these cherished vacation properties, many of which have been in the family for generations.

"It is in part a reflection of our changing society," said Jerry Bley, a land use and environmental consultant in Readfield. "For one thing, the idea of going out to the island for the whole summer, the way families did back in the 1950s, is mostly a thing of the past. There are fewer families with that kind of seasonal lifestyle."

These days, he said, it's more common for busy family groups to rotate through the shared cottage for a week or two, depending on how much time the parents have off from work, children's summer sports obliga-

tions, the vacation needs of family members and other factors.

In addition, families are more widespread geographically. Some members may want to subdivide the land and build a second cottage. Some have more money and more free time than others. Divorce, more common now than in generations past, further complicates things. The cost of maintaining the property is often a problem. And as the tribe expands, so does the possibility of friction between individuals and family groups, making the casual sharing of a summer home an exercise in frustration.

Despite these challenges, Bley said, the option of selling may be completely off the table. Instead, some landowners find ways to hand the vacation home over to the next generation in detailed legal arrangements aimed at keeping the property intact, ensuring its upkeep and minimizing family discord.

"Just because people have different objectives doesn't mean they can't come up with a solution," he said.

Preserving family memories

"The draw of the summer camp experience is very strong," said Mark Standen, a lawyer in Yarmouth who specializes in estate planning, property succession and family trusts. "People want to keep *See Camp, Page C2*

Why the 'divorce diet' works ... too well

Back in 2008, when I was 55, I found myself negotiating an unexpected divorce from my husband of 28 years. There's almost nothing good I can say about this period of my life. I had always thought of myself as cheerful, resourceful and self-reliant, but our separation and eventual divorce uncovered dark wells of insecurity, suspicion and self-pity. It was a painful time, and I am grateful it is behind me.



MEG HASKELL

The one silver lining, sort of, to all the complicated anxiety I felt about the divorce was that, without the slightest effort on my part, I dropped about 25 pounds. Tall and big-boned, I have never been overweight, but suddenly I was as slim as a smelt. A few months earlier I had been packing myself into my size 12 wardrobe, glancing nervously toward the 14s in the L.L. Bean catalog. Now, I was slithering into a size 10 and even, for a few particularly gaunt weeks, borrowing some size 8s from a svelte friend.

"You actually have no butt at all," an observant co-worker remarked. It wasn't a compliment.

This all happened without my bidding. I certainly wasn't trying to lose weight; I was just getting through my days and nights, one after the next. I went to work, cleaned the house, took care of my pets, called my lawyer, called my therapist, called my financial advisor and ranted incessantly to my friends.

Meals were the last thing on my mind. I had no appetite at all, no interest in buying, preparing or consuming food. Breakfast was black coffee and sometimes, when I remembered, a half a piece of toast. Lunch — what lunch? Supper consisted of a few crackers and a bit of cheese, with some wine to dull the sharp edge of my anxiety and ease me toward sleep. I'm not proud of any of this, and certainly not recommending it — just saying what it was.

I wish I could remember the title of the book a concerned friend put into my hands. It explained in clear language how divorce, one of the most stressful events in our lives, triggers the adrenaline-charged "fight or flight" response. This is the same hyper-vigilant endocrine surge that protects us when we are in a leopard-infested jungle or a combat zone, but it can kill us if it goes on unabated over time.

Basically, my body, fearful for its very survival, was constantly prepared for a fight to the finish or a flight to a higher tree. Food in my gut would only slow my metabolism and make my responses more sluggish, my demise more certain. Even though my conscious brain knew better, my animal instincts had seized control.

That book helped me take charge and move forward. I kind of liked being rail-thin for the first time ever, but I couldn't afford to lose any more weight on the divorce diet. And I needed to *See Haskell, Page C2*

Maine service agency director set to retire

Eastern Area Agency on Aging looks to future

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

From home-delivered meals and essential transportation services to a phone-in book club and classes in tai chi, thousands of seniors living in Washington, Hancock, Penobscot and Piscataquis counties have been touched by the Eastern Area Agency on Aging. But despite important progress on many fronts, plenty of challenges remain, according to former executive director Noelle Merrill, 65, who is retiring this week after leading the agency since 2005.

Dyan Walsh, formerly the director of community and caregiver services, is stepping into the

leadership position after nine years with the agency. Walsh said Monday she has "no huge changes" planned. Top goals will be to expand and diversify funding, work against food insecurity and combat social isolation, she said.

The overarching challenge the agency faces going forward is the extremely rural nature of the 13,000-square-mile territory it serves, Merrill said, where the population is aging, communities are sparsely settled, public transportation is nonexistent, housing is dilapidated, access to medical care is limited and poverty is widespread.

"Our area has some really remotely located people," Merrill



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK|BDN

Noelle Merrill facilitates her last book group meeting at the Eastern Area Agency on Aging before her retirement. Noelle has run the group which meets monthly, since 2009 and members have read more than 75 books.

said. "We are constantly asking how we can help in our most rural areas."

Nelson Durgin, board president and a Bangor city councilor, said Merrill has been "very good about getting out into the hinterlands"

and building partnerships in what he says is the largest territory east of the Mississippi River served by an agency on aging.

"She has always thought through the issues and worked *See Merrill, Page C2*