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Senior Living

Happiness and Fulfillment in Golden Years

Mental health experts share factors that contribute to contentment.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE CONNECTION

On most evenings, 96-year-old Dorothy “Dot” Brown can be found playing Scrabble or a game of bridge. A retired nurse who relocated to Virginia from Pennsylvania 11 years ago, Brown makes it a point to walk at least one mile each day and takes two Zumba or low-impact aerobics classes each week. She attends services regularly at St. Matthews United Methodist Church in Annandale, volunteers her time for projects like cooking and serving meals for others, and says her wide circle of friends and close-knit family are her greatest sources of strength.

“I moved here to be closer to my

“You have to keep busy and active and you have to persevere. I am glad to be 96 years old and still able to walk without any help.”
— Dot Brown

daughters in Annandale, who are 68 and 71,” said Brown, who also has five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. “My family is so important to me. We have so much fun together and now we all live within a half-hour of each other. There isn’t a week that goes by that we don’t get together.”

While Brown partly attributes her well-preserved mental and physical fitness to genetics, she says her lifestyle and attitude also play a role. “You have to keep busy and active and you have to persevere,” she said. “There are days when I don’t feel like getting out, but I have to push myself. I am glad to be 96 years old and still able to walk without any help.”

Mental health professionals say the keys to happiness as one gets older include involvement in social activities or community and religious groups, maintaining a network of friends and regular exercise. Lisa Jackson-Cherry, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and chair of the department of counseling at Marymount University in Arlington, suggests “taking up a new hobby or seeking out a career change that brings a sense of meaning.”

In fact, experts say many of Brown’s daily activities are common among seniors who

report contentment with their lives. “Everybody is unique, but overall happiness comes if people continue to do things that they have done over their lifetime that have

brought them joy and strength,” said Ioana Boie, Ph.D., an assistant professor of coun

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PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Dot Brown, 96, holds two of her great-grandchildren, Harper and Eamon. Mental health experts say that strong familial relationships contribute to one’s overall sense of well-being.

‘Age in Place’ to Satisfy Evolving Needs

BY JOSH BAKER
FOUNDER, BOWA BUILDERS

Your family may be approaching a transitional time in home ownership. Perhaps the kids have already moved out, or your “nest” is nearly empty as your last child contemplates going off to college. Or maybe you’re craving a living space that is more comfortable and convenient as it becomes more difficult to move around. There are many reasons couples choose to “age in place,” or modify their home to meet changing needs rather than purchase a new property.

WHERE THE HEART IS

Many people have spent years making memories in their home and have grown to be deeply connected to their neighbors and the property’s ideal location. So instead of uprooting and leaving their home’s rich history for a new property, couples are seizing the opportunity to transform their beloved home into a space that fits their specific short- and long-term needs. Sometimes this



Baker

A ‘SUITE’ ADDITION

The most common “aging in place” transition involves adding a more accessible second master suite to the first floor. This convenient change allows a couple to go about their day-to-day lifestyle without navigating stairs, yet still have ample space upstairs for visiting children and guests. This type of remodeling project is ideal because it is often unobtrusive, allowing homeowners to remain living in their home during construction with

decision involves revamping existing space or incorporating a user-friendly residential elevator into the home. In many cases couples opt to add ground-level space in a way that complements the home.



Grab bars in shower and easy access help set the stage for seamless aging in place.

minimal disturbance.

DETAILS THAT MATTER

When making renovation plans, especially for a person using a wheelchair or

SEE EVOLVING NEEDS, PAGE 6

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Active and Prepared

Aging-in-place solutions aid senior's decision to stay put.

BY JOHN BYRD

“My mother spent the last two years of her life in a nursing home,” said northern Virginia native Connie Sorrentino, who recently turned 70. “You never know what’s ahead. I spent a couple of years looking at retirement homes, then decided that the immediate problem was adapting my current house so it’s easier to use.”

Sorrentino, who lives alone, practices yoga and observes a strict vegetarian and fish diet, said she has “no stiffness” and is quite active in local church and civic groups.

“Still, since I’ve decided to stay put, I’m making changes that will make it easier for me to sustain myself happily for years to come,” she said.

Along these lines, the retired economist has been working with Mindy Mitchell, certified aging-in-place specialist at Burke-based Sun Design Remodeling, planning out the future of a home in Arlington she’s occupied for more than 30 years. Recently, the design-build firm remodeled several rooms in Sorrentino’s four-bedroom ranch; she was pleased with the outcome, and gratified to



PHOTOS BY BETH WALTERS

Counter high drawers instead of overhead cabinets; cabinets pulls and sharper more focused lighted are among the simple but effective aging-in-place solutions that have made it easier for Sorrentino to use her kitchen.

learn that the firm’s expertise includes re-designing homes to meet aging-in-place requirements.

“We’re seeing many more seniors exploring ideas that will help them continue to live independently in their own homes,” said Mitchell. “Sometimes we’re called in when mobility issues have become inescapable. But it’s always easier when you plan ahead.”

Mitchell said that an aging-in-place design is far more economical and practical when it’s rolled into an already planned remodeling project — which is the course Sorrentino is following in the current makeover of her kitchen, several bathrooms and other parts of the circa-1950s rambler.

“I’m remodeling several high-use spaces; it’s a plan that makes it easier for me to do



More

Sun Design Remodeling frequently sponsors workshops on Aging-In-Place solutions. Call 703-425-5588 or visit www.SunDesignInc.com.

Connie Sorrentino, 70, (center) reviews plans to introduce aging-in-place innovations into her kitchen and several bathrooms with Sun Design Remodeling’s Mindy Mitchell (left) and designer Kim Kruskamp.

everything I need with minimal challenge,” said Sorrentino.

Mitchell said that the changes can seem discrete to outsiders, but they “make all the difference in reducing the ergonomic exertions of daily life.”

In place of overhead kitchen shelves, for instance, Mitchell is recommending counter-

high pull-out drawers for regularly-used items, reducing the need for out-of-reach overhead cabinetry. Small hard to grasp knobs will be replaced with cabinet pulls. Sharper, more concentrated lighting in key locations provides the visual support needed to move about confidently.

In two bathrooms, plans call for precisely located vertical and horizontal grab bars. The shower will have

a lower curve for easier access. Traditional and hand-held shower faucets simplify bathing. The faucets themselves feature adjustable levers rather than knobs. The floor will be surfaced in non-slip tile.

“Working out the details is fascinating,” Sorrentino said. “The best part, though, is interior design that perfectly integrates all these new features. I don’t want the house to look ‘senior-friendly’—just pretty.”

Rogers’ Retirement Dream

Aging-in-place remodel required a generator, much to relief of their neighbors.

BY JOHN BYRD

Ted Rogers, 73, recently completed a senior-friendly makeover to his home, with the help of a master builder to meet his often challenging technical requirements.

Rogers, a former Navy pilot, had lived in 18 houses all over the world before settling in a circa 1960s ranch in Vienna with his wife and children in the early 1980s. The traditional brick rambler had previously been owned by a local farmer whose family had worked a nearby spread for generations.

The house was conventional, but solidly constructed. Still, as Rogers and his wife, Wanda, settled into their 70s they recognized several aspects of the home that wouldn’t be ideal in retirement.

“We were looking for long term comfort and security,” said Rogers. “That meant the usual wish-list — upgraded kitchen, larger

master bedroom suite.”

Then, too, the master shower would be a “roll-in” design, suitable for a wheelchair if needed.

Doors and hallways would be wider, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act specifications. There would be convenient grab bars near the tub.

“But I also insisted on a way to keep our systems operating in the event of a power failure,” said Rogers. “We’re a bit off the main road and have been through long outages. You want to avoid this kind of thing as you get older.”

Complicating matters were several technical questions. For instance: what was the appropriate size and performance capability of a home generator adequate for powering the substantially enlarged home the Rogers now envisioned?

“The more I looked into it, the more I realized that there are a lot of issues with home

generators that have to be worked out between the contractor and the gas company,” Rogers recalled.

“I was aware of plans like mine that hadn’t worked well for the homeowner. I wanted enough power to keep the house running for days at a time, but the technology is still evolving and relatively few contractors have mastered it.”

Then Rogers met David Foster, president of Foster Remodeling Solutions in Lorton, a veteran builder with a track record in home generator solutions.

“David came highly recommended, but it was meeting him that proved decisive,” said Rogers. “His love of building impressed me. As we started walking through the house together, I could see that he understood my vision.”

THE STARTING POINT: a 2,553 square-foot, three-bedroom ranch on two acres, and a conversation regarding the best options for accommodating a master bedroom suite, a spacious gourmet kitchen, a two-car garage with a second floor studio and a home generator adequate for powering everything for



Wanda and Ted Rogers in front of their remodeled home.

days a time without need for refueling.

“The call for a generator in a retirement dream home struck a chord with me” said Foster. “We have a sizable seniors clientele, so I’ve been steadily servicing the growing demand for this type of application — absorbing the learning curve just as the problems with the power grid have become ap-

parent to everyone.”

In Rogers’ case, Foster specified a state-of-the-art unit, one powerful enough to run all of his client’s electrical needs for about a week without changing gas or oil.

And the timing couldn’t have been more perfect. Shortly after the project’s completion in spring 2012, the now-infamous derecho in early July

More

Staff at Foster Remodeling Solutions periodically offer workshops on home remodeling topics. Call 703-550-1371 or visit www.FosterRemodeling.com.

“But when I walked through my front door two days into the outage, my generator was on, the house was cool, and all the electrical systems were working just fine.”

The rest of the neighborhood was another story. “My neighbor’s basement flooded when his sump pump stopped,” said Rogers. “People were dealing with spoiled food, no lights, no phone — and no air conditioning during some of the hottest temperatures in years.”

Ever the good neighbor, Rogers organized a relief effort at once, supplying power support where needed, even clearing refrigerator space so nearby friends could preserve their frozen foods.

“We’d invite neighbors to sit in the air conditioning, and watch the news or check their emails. We were like a local community center,” he said.

The larger satisfaction to Rogers, though, is that his computer, internet and security systems continued to perform as usual. “It’s a relief to know that you’re connected to the outside world — especially in an area-wide emergency. Five days is a long time to be cut off.”

Older Residents Reflect on Decades

BY KEN MOORE
THE ALMANAC

Ellen Breen turned 95 on May 5, 2013. Her granddaughter plans to be married in September.

“If I am alive, I am going,” Breen said. Her grandchildren call her Rah Rah.

“I love it. It’s one of my favorite sounds. When they say it it really means something.”

Dennis Lewis is 75. He had a stroke 15 days before his 70th birthday.

“If I had it to do over again, I’d drink twice as much water and half as much soda, I think it would have made a difference in triggering the stroke,” Lewis said.

“Life changing,” he said of his stroke.

Lewis, of Potomac, says he’s grateful he had made plans to see a friend that Saturday afternoon five years ago.

“I had the stroke at 4 in the morning. I tried for 45 minutes to move nine inches,” Lewis said.

His friend came over to meet at the agreed-to time hours later, and found Lewis incapacitated. His friend saved his life, Lewis said.

goals that bring them satisfaction, according to Rathus. “Successful agers may no longer compete in certain athletic or business activities. ... Instead, they focus on matters that allow them to maintain a sense of control over their own lives.”

Ellen Breen, of Potomac, used to read a book every week, but can’t read now because of vision problems.

“Oh, I miss reading the headlines,” she said. So she turns to the television to keep up with current news.

“We lived in historic times,” Breen said. There were so many things that happened.”

A big memory from her childhood, she said, was Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic, and seeing Lindbergh in person at Dupont Circle.

“I was 9 years old. I had a cousin who was 19,” she said. “She took me by the hand and we ran from her mother’s house on N Street, and got there just in time to see Lindbergh greet the crowd.”

When the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped, “that was a horrible thing. That made a big impression on me.”

Breen worked as a secretary to one of the United States Supreme Court Justices, Harold Hitz Burton.

Her work with the Child Welfare League was her greatest passion. She helped investigate the treatment of adopted children and potential adoptive mothers and fathers.

“You could not believe the things we found, horrible, terrible things,” she said. “It opened my eyes, I was a little girl out of convent school. There were also good stories, very good stories, but it opened my eyes to life. I had no idea such things existed.”

“It gave me perspective on my own life, with my children,” she said.

Religion is critical in Breen’s life.

“That I think is the most important thing,” Breen said. “We don’t know what’s in store for us. It’s very frightening, I think so, and it is also exciting.”

According to Rathus, “successful agers tend to be optimistic. Retaining social contacts and building new ones also contributes to a positive outlook, as does continuing with one’s athletic activities, when view.”

Successful agers form emotional

SEE REFLECT. PAGE 7

Happiness and Fulfillment in Golden Years

FROM PAGE 3

selling at Marymount University. “Find out what brings you joy and happiness and takes you out of your routine.”

STRONG FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS such as Brown’s are another factor in one’s overall sense of well-being. “Reconnecting with family members can bring happiness,” said Boie. “That’s also sometimes tricky because it can bring up unresolved issues in the family. Long-lasting tension in the family can lead to sadness in the sense of premature loss. Try and work out unresolved tensions and issues with family members.”

When frequent and meaningful contact with family members is not possible, Boie says that even family memorabilia can offer inspiration. “Create an album of memories and insights to share with future generations,” she said.

Intimacy is also important. “If a person has lost their spouse and sex was part of their life, that is a big part of who they are and will impact happiness,” said Boie. “Just because a person is older doesn’t mean that they don’t need to experience intimacy, although they might not experience it in the way a person who is 25 would. We should alleviate some of the tension around talking about this issue.”



Dot Brown, 96, helps assemble oral rehydration kits for a World Health Organization and UNICEF project. The Springfield resident credits her active lifestyle and genetics for her well-preserved mental and physical health.

In addition to human social connections, relationships with furry friends can also provide gratification. “Pets can bring a lot

of joy,” said Boie. “It is a very rewarding relationship. I know people that are connected to a parrot or cat or dog. Animals can be warm, reassuring parts of an elderly person’s life.”

FINDING A DEEPER MEANING in life and having a sense of purpose can also affect one’s outlook. “Seniors are dealing with multiple issues like their own spirituality and what that might be,” said Frederic Bemak, Ed.D, a professor of counseling and development at George Mason University in Fairfax. “One might ask: ‘Who am I at this moment?’ Have I done things that are in-line with my own value system and beliefs?”

Discovering new outlets for self-expression can lead to a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction as well. “What someone does with their own creativity can be rich and fulfilling,” said Bemak who lives in Fairfax Station. “Through physical activity and creative arts, seniors extend a sense of their creative selves that they might not have had time to do in their younger years.”

Meanwhile, Brown is making plans for a weeklong summer vacation with her family. “There will be 22 of us in one house at the beach,” she said. “I know we’re going to have a great time.”



Dot Brown (pictured with great-grandchildren Clara, Blake and Becca) celebrated her 96th birthday recently with her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She says spending time with her family brings her joy.

‘Age in Place’ to Satisfy Evolving Needs

FROM PAGE 3

walker, ensure there is enough space. Wider doorways and hallways, as well as large curb-less showers with grab bars and hand-held shower heads are common features even for families without a disabled member. Other popular requests with noted value include appliances with lever doors, varied countertop heights, and minimal steps through passageways.

Creating a five-foot turning radius can greatly improve maneuverability for someone with limitations, but also feels a bit more spacious for the active family.

It’s a reality that many people will endure some kind of temporary mobility challenge in their life, perhaps from surgery rehabilitation or an accident, so it makes sense to design your home in a practical, universal way to accommodate such unpredictable circumstances.

If needed, first-floor laundry facilities and outdoor ramps also add convenience to the new space.

With all of these changes, it is important to maintain the current look and feel of your home as much as possible, so consider choosing materials and colors that match the style of the rest of your home.



The addition of a main-level master suite with easy access to outdoor living space paves the way for aging in place and family entertaining.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

In instances when a small lot or zoning restrictions hamper the ability to add on square footage for a master suite or other area, there are alternative options to help a family stay in their home.

There may be seldom-used space on the first floor that can be reconfigured into a cozy master suite with the expert eye of a design-build team.

Regardless of emotional attachment to the

family home, homeowners being involved in the remodeling process allows them to create a space that best mirrors their individual needs to age gracefully and with less stress.

Transforming a home to accommodate the later years in life creates a place that is easier to manage without giving up the opportunity to reminisce, or surrendering the cherished role of hosting distant family and friends.



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lost (adj): 1. unable to find the way. 2. not appreciated or understood. 3. no longer owned or known

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Crafting a Wheelchair Friendly Master Bath

Accessibility designer inspired by personal experiences.

BY JOHN BYRD

“We are seeing more seniors choosing to stay in their homes than ever before,” says aging-in-place specialist Russ Glickman.

“This is partly a function of the fact aging-in-place solutions are improving, but we’re also learning — as a society — that good universal design well-integrated into the home can work for the entire family.”

Glickman points to ramps and walkways perfectly integrated into porches and veranda; wheelchair friendly dining counters that double as serving stations and clean-up stations when needed; wider doorways and grab bars that prove convenient for everyone.

Of course, there can also be challenging technical considerations. In an assignment completed just last month, the remodeler collaborated with an occupational therapist in designing a master bathroom for a Lorton-based senior who had recently transitioned to a wheelchair.

“Here we have an individual who has lived in the same house for 25 years,” Glickman said. “His son occupies the same residence, so there was really no thought of moving into a nursing facility. My goal was to execute a plan that enables a capable mature male — who happens to be in a wheelchair — to live a fully independent life in his own home.”

Glickman, who has operated Glickman Design/Build for 30 years, understands such household challenges first-hand. When his son, Michael, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy almost two decades ago, Glickman set about acquiring several certifications in universal design specialties; after 15 years of enabling seniors and people with disabilities, his projects are frequent award-winners in an increasingly high-profile accessible living category.

A critical component to the just-completed Lorton assignment was designing a



Russ Glickman recently completed a “wet room” for a senior who is now mostly in a wheelchair. The solution includes a curbless shower, wheelchair accessible counter surfaces and a pull down arm that facilitates access to the toilet.

More

Russ Glickman periodically offers workshops on accessible living and aging-in-place topics. Visit www.GlickmanDesignBuild.com or call 301-444-4663

wheel-chair friendly master bath that allows the homeowner to perform all his bathing and toiletry routines without assistance.

The result is what is known in the industry as a “wet room”—a completely waterproofed space that includes a curbless level-access shower, conveniently located grab-bars, and counter space designed for easy wheel chair maneuverability.

The key to a curbless shower design is floor grading and tile layout, Glickman says. The floor is framed to support a very gentle

slope that keeps water flowing towards the drain.

A weight-tested, pull-down metal arm assists the owner in moving back and forth between the wheelchair and the toilet.



PHOTOS BY WAYNE JACKSON



The wet-room’s finishwork features skid-proof ceramic tile, an ADA-compliant doorway, a sink with a wheel-chair friendly L-shaped counter surface and plenty of barrier-free room to move about.

Residents Reflect on Decades Gone By

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possible, and one’s artistic and cultural activities.”

DENNIS LEWIS HAS ADVICE for younger generations.

“Find what you’re good at, find what is important to you, find what matters, what are your talents,” he said.

“Develop your level of confidence to where you will be an impact player,” he said. “You have to believe in yourself.”

Lewis said he learned from two experi-

ences in his life when he bucked the trend, doing the opposite of what people advised him to do.

When Howard Stern came to town, Lewis said people told him Stern would not be a worthwhile story.

“They were all saying, ‘He’s terrible, he’s terrible, he’s misconceived, he’s a total failure,’” said Lewis, who covered radio for the Washington Star at the time.

But “that’s all people were talking about — him.”

That was after the disco era.

“It was the second time I ignored what

people demanded what I write,” he said. “The other time, they wanted me to write that disco was dead. And the next year, Saturday Night Fever came out. I was glad I resisted.”

Lewis takes Metro Access most every other week to see a new movie either on Bethesda Row, the Landmark, or downtown and to shop at book stores.

He subscribes to film magazines, and watches the Oscars every year, knowing most every movie nominated.

Lewis said he cried when Dwight Eisenhower lost the Presidential election in

1956. “It taught me that the best man doesn’t always win,” he said. “In movies, you are always fooled by happy endings and you think that’s the way it works.”

Ellen Breen bypasses opportunity to give advice.

“Oh, I don’t think I’m qualified to answer such questions,” she said with a smile.

But she knows how her birthday wishes have changed over the last nine decades.

“Before, I was looking forward to happiness and peace in my own life, my personal life. Now that seems absolutely non-existent when you compare it to what is happening in the world today,” said Breen. “What I would long to see is peace in the world, if it would only start in Washington, D.C.”

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