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Organized for the End Orinda couple annually updates last wishes

By Cathy Dausman



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

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 his 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

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"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

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