

## The sophistication of simplicity

By Ruth Ostrow

LAST week I began my three-part series into Voluntary Simplicity, a new movement taking the Western world by storm. As social analyst Rodney Vlasis, one of the main promoters of the movement in Australia, says: "Realising happiness cannot be bought, or achieved through material success. People around the world are pruning down their work hours and financial commitments in order to have a richer inner life. Basically put, more time for family, friends and themselves."

With an estimated 15 per cent of the US's 77 million baby boomers and a significant portion of the Australian public now part of the trend, I have decided to devote the next two columns to looking at some of the people who are finding meaning in Simplicity and why.

Like prominent Sydney businessman Peter Ritchie, a past president of food chain McDonald's Australia, who was working 100 hours a week before realising the damage this had on his family, his body and the quality of his life.

Ritchie, 58, is what's known as a "down-shifter", a sub-section of the Voluntary Simplicity movement where people turn down promotion or elect to work part-time in order to have more emotional abundance. In other words they give up income for richer inner wealth. In fact, US research shows that a quarter of all Americans are making such a choice.

Ritchie says: "By speaking openly, I'm hoping to help other young executives avoid the mistake I made. I was not spending enough time with my wife, children and friends. So a few years ago I quit my position.

"I have learned that you need balance in your life. After working 80 to 100 hours a week I would come home and veg out. I was exhausted.

"Something has to suffer and it's your family first of all."

He says: "I still feel guilty for what I've done. I recognised the cost too late. My children are already a lot older. I missed watching them develop as human beings. That wonderful enjoyment is gone.

"The fathering I should have been giving them, you can't catch up on. And that's the biggest sadness for me."

He now believes a lot of fathers embrace a frenetic work-life because they are scared of going home, scared of being alone with themselves. They are full of insecurity. "Money becomes a measure of self-worth."

Nowadays he tries to lead a more nurturing and nourishing life. The complexity and demands have gone. "I have restricted my work to 30 hours a week to give myself more time for my wife and two children, for reading and sport."

Because he still enjoys working, he remains on a few company boards, including Westpac, the Seven network and McDonald's.

"Occasionally I feel really guilty when I look at my morning and there's nothing scheduled. I think, 'Maybe I should be doing...' It's a life-time habit. But then I think, 'Bugger it, I'll go see a movie'. I want to do spontaneous things like that because it gives me real satisfaction.

"I used to go on holidays and never be able to just relax. For instance, when we went skiing, I put the family on a tight schedule. Believe me, if I could do it all again, I would do it so differently."

Not that simplifying his life has been easy. "I'm getting counselling to help me. I think I was addicted to the adrenaline.

"It's a continual battle. I'm still wrestling with myself. I've got enough money to live very well but I still notice people with a hell of a lot more than me." But he says there comes a point where you just have to say: "Enough is enough."

Meanwhile, Krystyna Monka is a woman who typifies the Voluntary Simplicity movement. In her mid 40s, based in Perth, she works as a primary school teacher. Her husband works for a communications company and she has three children. She also runs a website: Simplify Your Life with Krissie, dedicated to helping women.

She says she and her partner started changing their lifestyle when they realised the emptiness of doing things they had no interest in, out of habit. "During the week we'd be rushing around working and doing chores, then over the weekend we'd be fixing things or doing the gardening.

"We wanted our lives back, so we began by simplifying the house, taking out everything we didn't need. Most people live in a mess which costs them time. I organised the clutter, began planning menus ahead of time.

"Next we simplified the garden, getting rid of as many bushes and plants as we could, creating a clean, liveable area, cutting the mowing in half.

"Voluntary Simplicity is not about depriving oneself, rather prioritising. If you can afford to delegate, getting a gardener or home help, that's great. We couldn't, so we did what we could by cutting back responsibilities."

She says people should only buy and keep the things they really need. "It's not about keeping up with the Joneses, or looking at magazines and craving material possessions that weigh you down.

"We got rid of the mortgage and live in a modest home so there's more time for ourselves and the family. We got rid of our credit cards which helped heaps, we gave charities our 'just-in-case' clothes, and we threw out toxic relationships that were costing us emotional effort.

"Now we live very simply. We drive 25-year-old cars. Some people think we're crazy. They say we could get a big mortgage and live in a bigger house in a better suburb. Their kids tease our children at school, which can be very hurtful. But we feel sorry for people like that. They don't really live any better than we do."

She gives women helpful advice on her website. "I preach the 3D's: 'Do it, delegate it or dump it.' Voluntary Simplicity is about conscious, mindful living."

She says because of her simplified lifestyle she now has time to do meaningful things that connect her to the community, such as charity work. "It's so wonderful to put back in. We are very content."

Next week a look at the phenomenon of SeaChange and an interview with people, such as computer industry strategist Delicia Bone, who are moving back to the land.

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