

Dreaming up the simple life

By Ruth Ostrow

THERE is a new movement taking the Western world by storm. A quiet revolution. Over the next few weeks, I will be examining it in depth because I believe it will be a force that shapes how we live.

It's called Voluntary Simplicity, a trend that became popular in the US in the 1990s under various titles and umbrella groups such as Simple Living and Abundant Living. And it's spreading to Australia with a vengeance, according to one of the chief promoters of the movement here, well-respected social analyst, culture-buster and psychologist Rodney Vlasis.

Vlasis, who is setting up the Centre for the New Aussie Dream, based on a similar organisation in the US, to help Australians value their lives beyond how much money they can earn, says, "Realising happiness cannot be bought, or achieved through material success. People are sick of feeling like rats on a treadmill.

Having borrowed too much, made their lives too financially complex, been strung-up paying mortgages and credit card debts, many around the world are using the word 'simplicity' as their mantra.

"They are divesting themselves of material possessions, pruning down their work hours, in order to have a richer inner life. Basically put -- more time for children and family, friends and for themselves."

According to the Trends Research Institute, 15 per cent of the US's 77million baby boomers will have joined the movement by the end of the decade. Gerald Celente, founder and director of TRI, believes Voluntary Simplicity is one of the trends that will help shape the new millennium.

Vlasis says while statistics for Australia are still being collated, at a guess about 15-20 per cent of adult Australians are looking for fundamental change. "People tend to be happier when life is slower, with good relationships and a connection with community."

From all the research material I have read on the matter, Voluntary Simplicity is a reaction against the frantic consumerism made popular in the greed-is-good 80s. As work pressures increase and life in the global economy speeds up, advocates are wondering how to slow down and untangle themselves, how to claw back control of their lives.

All around the world people are weighing up the true cost of materialism, to themselves and to their environment. Unlike the drop-outs of the 60s, most people who would be classed as part of Voluntary Simplicity still live as part of the system. But they want balance and wholeness.

So who are the practitioners of Voluntary Simplicity? There is no one group, rather a vast range of people who are motivated to simplify their lives.

Some are city dwellers into "down-shifting", or knocking back promotions to have more time with the family. For instance, 60 Minutes ran a program this year about men such as Peter Ritchie, former boss of McDonald's, and Daniel Petre, a

former vice-president of Microsoft, who have altered their working lives to spend time at home with their children.

Others, like my husband and I, are making a sea change, moving to areas more conducive to leisure and simplicity, throwing off the shackles of mortgage. Yet others, such as computer industry strategist Delicia Bone, are moving to the land, choosing to be ecologically responsible and self-sufficient.

Bone, whom I will feature in coming weeks, is an example of those now using technology to work away from the office -- taking computers to the tops of mountains to plug into the world and run their careers. Others I'll be writing about are seeking to fulfil their creative souls, such as James Coates, well-paid male model and actor, who has given away fame and fortune to join a travelling musical troupe.

There are many internet sites catering to the various groups in the movement under titles such as the Simple Living Network and Frugal Living Resources, and there are countless international books and bestsellers on the subject, such as Linda Breen Pierce's *Choosing Simplicity*; Mark Burch's *Simplicity and Stepping Lightly*, *Simplicity for People and the Planet*; Sarah Ban Breathnach's *Simple Abundance*; and Robert Theobald's *Reworking Success*.

The movement is becoming so strong that two marketing heavyweights, Margaret Craig-Lees, from the University of NSW school of marketing, and Constance Hill, PhD, from the University of Wollongong department of marketing, have prepared a report to help educate companies about this growing demographic.

Hill says that while it is very difficult to put advocates of Voluntary Simplicity under one banner because they come from so many divergent social stratas and go under different names: Downshiftners, Strong Simplifiers, and the Simple Living movement, she says the commonality is people wanting more time.

"These people are prepared to trade lifestyle for a life, for personal activities and friends. Some are doing it for ecological reasons, trying to save the planet. Others are looking for a spiritual path, yet others are looking for a relief from the day-to-day pressures of existence.

"The key similarity is that they are wanting some control. They want to gain back their lives. They don't want to be owned by the company or mortgage, feeling they have no real choices."

Craig-Lees says that voluntary simplifiers do generally come from a healthy socioeconomic group and do spend money. But they are not interested in goods as symbols. The label has gone. This group wants quality and durability, so that they don't have to keep purchasing.

She says that while 80 per cent of non-Voluntary Simplicity people she interviewed included work and security as important things in their life, members of the movement rated these far less prominently.

She thinks many are baby boomers adrift without an anchor, those who have now turned to Buddhism or spiritualism because materialism did not make them happy. "They were the first generation to be brought up without religion. They had no church, and once you lose a church, you lose community, and you need to find something else that substitutes for the sense of belonging."

Richard Eckersley, visiting fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University in Canberra and a supporter of the movement, says US research shows that one-quarter of all Americans are choosing to sacrifice income for less stress, and the trend is continuing here.

Eckersley believes in the correlation between disease and lifestyle and says general social anxiety caused by feelings of lack of control and uncertainty is affecting our wellbeing, which is prompting people to seek alternatives to protect ourselves and mother nature.

Next week, I'll look at some of those who have chosen simplicity.

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