

Are You Living the New American Dream?

Less Money! More Meaning!

By Marie Sherlock

In many ways Kevin Cornwell and Catherine Dovey are an average retired couple. They take leisurely walks together, work in their yard, volunteer frequently and travel a good deal. But the Vancouver, Washington, couple are, in fact, far from average. Kevin and Catherine retired in 1995 at ages 38 and 36, respectively, decades away from their Golden Years.

No, they didn't win the lottery, inherit a fortune or pull down six-figure salaries. What this husband-and-wife team did was "downshift," cutting back—considerably—on their expenditures. For instance, rather than "moving up" to a larger house, they stayed in their 1,100-square-foot home and replaced newer cars with older economy vehicles. They then paid off their credit card debt and shopped around for lower insurance premiums. The raises they earned as human resource professionals went into savings. Catherine cut her monthly clothing outlay from \$700 to \$100, began brown-bagging her lunches and even gave up her daily latte-and-scone habit. Instead of buying expensive

Marie Sherlock often writes about environmentally friendly lifestyles.



Kevin and Catherine now have plenty of time to devote to their true passions.

suits, Kevin bought ties to spruce up his wardrobe. By making changes like these, the couple went from total assets of \$90,000 in 1991 to \$400,000 in 1995, enough for them to live off their investment income—and retire.

Kevin and Catherine are converts to a lifestyle philosophy that some call simplicity, others have tagged as downshifting, and many simply refer to as frugal living. Advocates of this pared-down approach to spending contend that by consuming less, they can cut back their work hours and spend more time on their true passions. They believe that you can gain more from life—more time, more fulfill-

ment, more fun—on less. Ultimately, many, like Kevin and Catherine, are able to take early retirements.

Some people are hailing this model of "spend less, work less" as the New American Dream. In fact, a nonprofit group, the Center for a New American Dream, was formed to assist Americans aspiring to this lifestyle. CNAD's motto, "More Fun, Less Stuff," encourages people "to change the way they consume to improve the quality of their lives and their environment," according to the group's executive director, Betsy Taylor. She prefers calling the lifestyle advocated by her organization "living in balance."

David Emmille

“An early retirement lets you live at your own pace.”



The Wilson-Farrises found fun and inexpensive alternatives for family activities.

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"If you pursue the 'more is better' version of the American Dream, you need to put in more hours of work in order to afford it," explains Taylor. "A lot of people are pulling back from this model. They feel the need to find a balance and to set limits for their children—for their own well-being and for the planet."

Those seeking the New American Dream aren't just a handful of extremists. A study commissioned by the Merck Family Fund, a nonprofit grant-making organization, found that 62 percent of those surveyed hoped to simplify their lives and 28 percent had already downshifted to some extent.

Taylor views this phenomenon as an emerging culture of Americans who are attempting to live their beliefs. Some choose to economize so they can work fewer hours and spend more time with their families, while others, those deeply concerned about the environment, want to stop consuming the Earth's resources irresponsibly. "It's an age-old human goal," concludes Taylor, "to bring our actions in sync with our values."

Living in Balance

Interestingly, many of the methods that people are using to downshift are actually nonactions. Like Kevin and Catherine, they don't "buy up" to larger homes or cars; they aren't slaves to fashion and they don't feel

the need to have the latest electronic toy. It's simple: They just buy less.

Paul Wilson, 50, and Linda Farris, 51, demonstrate this technique. The Portland, Oregon, couple live, with 16-year-old daughter Kathryn, in the same two-bedroom house they purchased in 1978. At most, they dine out once a month at modest restaurants. Family time involves playing board games and attending free and low-cost concerts. No video game systems, cell phones or beepers can be found in the Wilson-Farris household. In fact, the family, even teenager Kathryn, rarely visits the mall.

Paul and Linda began adopting these frugal measures in 1990, and in just a year they had cut their living expenses by more than 45 percent. Four years later they'd paid off their mortgage. By 1995 Paul, then age 45, had retired from his job as an environmental mediator. Linda left her part-time practice as a physician in July of 1998 and now works 10 hours weekly in medical administration. They manage to cover their living expenses with the income from their investments.

For people who are thinking about taking the leap, however, medical insurance and the upwardly spiraling costs of college must be considered. Fortunately, most simplicity advocates are conscientious about covering the financial details of downshifting. Some secure low-cost,

high-deductible insurance policies; others, especially those with children, budget for HMO coverage. As for college, most downshifting parents have a regular savings plan but also encourage their children to meet some of the cost through their own savings from part-time work.

Paul and Linda credit their ability to economize to the book *Your Money or Your Life*, by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez (Penguin), which offers a nine-step program for evaluating purchases in terms of the hours you must work—"life energy"—in order to get those things.

The term "life energy" really resonated with Kevin Cornwell. "You're trading energy for money, and money for possessions. When you look at your purchases and realize that you're trading your life for them," he explains, "trying to keep up with the Joneses seems absurd."

Cost-cutting shouldn't be a dreary experience, insists Kevin. He views it as "a chance to think creatively." For example, when Kevin and Catherine took an 18-month cross-country trip, they rented out their home. "Basically, we let the renters make our mortgage payments," says Kevin.

"Make a game of it," he urges. "[Downshifting] is a lot of fun when you don't treat it so seriously."

More Fun, Less Stuff

If downshifting can be enjoyable, the results of cost-cutting efforts are often nothing short of exhilarating. For many, the ultimate reward is retiring in their 30s or 40s. However, an early retirement isn't the primary motivator for people with children. "The biggest benefit for us is more time for our family," says Diana Wright, who lives in a small town in Vermont. "By living simply, you gain the time to do whatever it is you're passionate about," she adds.

For Diana and husband Steve Hoffman, both 40, that passion is their kids, Eliza, 6, and Clara, 2. Diana, a research assistant, and Steve, a computer systems coordinator, each work fewer than 25 hours a week. While they're still aiming for an early retire-

“The ‘more is better’ lifestyle can exact a lofty price.”

ment, their current goal is to spend as much time as they can with Eliza and Clara. CNAD's Betsy Taylor believes that parents like Steve and Diana recognize that the "more is better" lifestyle exacts a lofty price. "People are realizing that by buying into that way of life, they're spending precious hours away from their families just to get the money to buy more."

The luxury of more time results in less stress. "I can spend my time as I want to—and that makes my life saner," says Linda Farris. A typical day for Linda and family might involve a morning walk, volunteering in the afternoon at their church, perhaps some reading and working in the garden. The family eats at least two meals together each day. "These are nice aspects of our life which would be difficult to have if we were coming home exhausted at seven every night and getting up at five," explains Linda.

Children benefit too. "The work-spend-work rat race is hard on kids," adds Taylor. "Where's the space for them to just be kids? To watch the clouds go by?" Diana Wright tries not to overschedule her daughters, ensuring ample time to just "hang out" together. "Days at home with the kids," she says, "those are precious times."

Essentially, the New American Dream boils down to contentment and peace of mind, explains Taylor, who cites the old maxim that money can't buy happiness. Downshiftingers

agree. "The kind of car I drive and the kind of clothes I wear don't affect my happiness," explains Kevin Cornwell, "but my happiness is greatly impacted by the way I spend my time."

Many downshiftingers' primary concern is that overconsumption harms the earth. "If everyone consumed as much as Americans do, we'd need four more planets," stresses Taylor. She points out that CNAD members "are delighted to find that if they consume less and wisely, they're not only improving their own lives, they're also improving the environment."

Roadblocks to Frugality

Why isn't everyone downshifting if it's a win-win proposition? Some folks associate simplifying with self-denial and austerity. But Taylor emphasizes that "the New American Dream is not about deprivation."

Rather than depriving its practitioners, living simply allows them to live more fully, they say. "It's about focusing on what's important to you and getting rid of the stuff that doesn't really matter," says Kevin. He claims that he wants for "absolutely nothing." He and Catherine love to travel and, since downshifting, they've been around the United States and journeyed to Europe and Central and South America. "In fact," Kevin adds, "I've already crossed everything off my 'to do' list for life, except a round-the-world trip, which we're planning to take in a couple of years."

Another misconception is that New Dreamers are selfish. The lifestyles of these downshiftingers ar-

gue against this notion. Linda contributes half of the after-tax income from her part-time job to charities and volunteers often with husband Paul. Kevin and Catherine donate about 10 percent of their income to charity and also volunteer for several organizations, including Habitat for Humanity and a neighborhood mediation project.

Author Vicki Robin is another example. All of the proceeds from her book, which sold more than 750,000 copies, are earmarked for charity. Neither Robin nor co-author Joe Dominguez kept one dime of the book's proceeds for themselves.

Support for Simplicity

Despite the overwhelming benefits of simplifying, it can be difficult for some folks to downshift. But help is available. Many turn to *Your Money or Your Life* for guidance. Others try to connect with people who are also considering a simpler way of life, or they seek out those who have already simplified. Organizations such as CNAD (877-NUDREAM, www.newdream.org), Seeds of Simplicity (877-UNSTUFF, www.seedsofsimplicity.org), the New Road Map Foundation (206-527-0437, www.newroadmap.org) and the Simple Living Network (800-318-5725, www.simpleliving.net) can also smooth the way.

However they manage to simplify, few downshiftingers return to their old ways of consuming, Taylor says. "They don't want to go back once they've started down this path. They're pretty darned happy!" **FC**

Mugshots/The Stock Market



Careful spending can enrich your quality of life.

Getting Started on Simplicity

Downshifting expert Vicki Robin recommends soul searching as the first step in simplifying. "Ask yourself: *What's important to me? What's my life about?*" she advises. If your answers reflect that people, causes and activities are your priorities—rather than acquisitions and status—you can pare down your lifestyle by taking actions consistent with these values. Robin offers the following tips to help you begin:

Stop trying to impress other people. You'll save thousands of dollars when you quit trying to "keep up with the Joneses."

Avoid recreational shopping. Opt instead for some nonconsumer fun such as walks in the

woods, get-togethers with friends and volunteer work within your community.

Adopt the old motto, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without." If you take care of what you have and get full value from

each item, you'll consume—and spend—less. **Do it yourself.** This applies to everything from baking bread to tuning up your car.

Buy used. Whether it's cars or can openers, you'll pay less if you purchase "pre-owned" items.