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BULLDOZERS & FEATHERS

This past Wednesday I spoke on the radio with Allan Harrison (The Voice of the Lakes Region!) about Bulldozers and Feathers. For over 35 years I have had the wonderful opportunity of working with family members as they assist their parents with making the oftentimes difficult decision of whether or not to move into a retirement or an assisted living setting. Helping our older friends and family members with this kind of decision is no easy job. We are not given an handbook when we turn 50 that tells us what we are supposed to do, much less how to do it. Most people learn by trial – and by error. That's where I can help by keeping you from making the two most common mistakes. You don't want to be a *'Bulldozer'* and you don't want to be a *'Feather'*.

Being a *'Bulldozer'* or *'Feather'* has absolutely no connection to gender --- As often as not men can be *'Feathers'* and women can be *'Bulldozers'*. Being either a *'Bulldozer'* or a *'Feather'* is equally unproductive and both create stress for the older parent ---- stress that with a small change in approach can be avoided.

You have the love the *'Bulldozers'*. They have done a stack of research and have explored all the options. They are thoroughly prepared and after they have a chance to see the place they are ready to make a decision! The problem is that they forget that it is not their decision to make! Their good intentions and their impatience get ahead of their compassion. In their zest to help *'Bulldozers'* overlook two very important things: First they forget that nobody likes to be told what to do – and that it always creates some degree of resentment. Secondly the *'Bulldozers'* in their focus on the practical fail to empathize with the very real feelings of loss their older parent/friend is feeling over leaving their own home.

The *'Bulldozer'* is focused on the future where the parent is grieving over the loss of the present and past.

The *'Feathers'* out there are equally well intentioned but they are afraid of exerting too much influence. In part this is out of respect for the right of parents to make their own decision and in part it is out of fear of being responsible for promoting an option that they might be blamed for later. Oftentimes the *'Feathers'* function pretty much in the role of a chauffeur, taking their parents from place to place but not offering up an opinion.

Older parents value family opinion and when none is given that absence is often interpreted as being either indifference or disapproval. The *'Feathers'* are resented for not taking a position just as much as the *'Bulldozer'* is resented for pushing too hard for one position! The answer of course is an approach that strikes a balance where family members provide assistance and opinions while at the same time reinforcing their parent's dignity by keeping them in control of their own decision making.

Knowing what not to be --- don't be a *'Bulldozer'* and don't be a *'Feather'* --- is the simple part. Knowing how to be effective in that broad area in-between is very challenging because it involves families working together in new, different and oftentimes uncomfortable ways. Providing this kind of assistance to an older parent requires a reversal of roles that does not always come easily for either the older parent or the child.

The good news is that it can be done! By redirecting all those good intentions with a change in approach and by learning to understand what the real issues are – families can and do find the process of evaluating a change in retirement living options to be something that can actually bring them closer together.

All change begins with awareness – so if you are a *'Bulldozer'* in your approach you might want to start looking for ways to ask more questions and make fewer

pronouncements and if you lean towards the *'Feather'* end of the scale you should consider volunteering your opinions in order to demonstrate your interest.

Welcome to the Golden Years!

Age Well!

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