



Flying from home

As Austin teens finish high school, local parents adapt to empty nests

By *Mary O. Parker*

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I'd never before cried in the produce section and, except for those times chopping onions, sobbing among vegetables was new to me.

The breakdown began while the pepper was still in my hand. "Don't do this here," I whispered to myself. I stared down hard into the cucumbers nearby, desperately trying to keep the floodgates shut. I couldn't stop myself. The time for tears had finally come.

I'd expected the tears back when my son, a recent high school graduate, pulled out of the driveway and flashed a sideways grin with a wave goodbye. I'd waited every day since that morning but those tears just wouldn't budge.

It was the red bell peppers that did it. They'd caught my eye while I was shopping for salad fixings and, trance-like, I'd begun picking out a beauty of a bell for Nicolas, who loved to eat them whole just like apples. Moments after ferreting out the perfect pepper, I awoke to the truth that there was no Nicolas at home to eat it.

Ann Debrosse, a mother of two, can identify. "I was at the grocery store checkout unloading my basket when I realized I'd grabbed a package of cookies that my daughter loved," she says. "Seeing those cookies and realizing she wasn't at home to eat them made me feel as if I'd been socked in the stomach."

"After that, I never knew when those types of feelings were going to bounce up and hit me."

Emotional roller coaster

As Central Texas high school seniors begin their countdown to graduation, moms and dads are coming to grips with the prospect of a kid-free "empty nest" at home. At a time when teens are preparing to leave home for college or the workforce, grocery shopping becomes just one of the many situations that can tilt a parent's emotions.

Karen Brouse, whose only child, Emily, recently left home, tells of her emotional roller coaster after dropping her daughter off at college. "We weren't a couple miles down IH-35 when I was so overcome with sadness. I didn't know why because I really was at peace with where she was and believed it was the right place for her," she says. "I wasn't prepared to be so sad."

She and her husband talked through the emotions, Brouse says. By the time they arrived back home in Austin, she thought she'd done a pretty good job of working things out. However, the second they pulled into the driveway she had a socked-in-the-stomach moment. "I began laughing and crying at the same time," she remembers.

"My daughter's closet has a small round window facing the front and the light was off. We must have fussed at her pretty much daily for the last ten years about leaving that closet light on all day and all night. I cried because that dark closet meant she was really gone, but I laughed because there were some things that maybe I wouldn't miss."

Jane Fuchs, an Austin mom, shares a tough moment of her own. She tells of the time she got up around midnight to get a drink of water. "I looked down the hall and noticed my son's door open. Josh would always close it when he was sleeping," she says. "Immediately I thought, 'Oh, he's still out with his friends.' Then I thought again, 'No, he's not. He's not coming home tonight. He'll sleep in his new bed at Rhodes. That door will stay open all night.' It was a little harder getting to sleep after that."

Evelyn DeVilliers, a psychologist who specializes in marriage and family counseling, says it's normal for parents to feel a sense of loss when children leave home. Moms and dads should allow themselves time to grieve, she says.

The truth is that some parents begin grieving months beforehand, undergoing what has been called "anticipation anxiety." Jan Anderson, an Austin-area therapist, says the time leading up to a child's departure can be toughest. Anticipating the imminent event causes feelings of fear and grief to come on with a vengeance. After these months of dread, however, many moms and dads are surprised to find that their child's actual departure wasn't as difficult as they had imagined. They often breathe a quiet sigh of relief, thinking, as Debrosse says she did on the day her daughter pulled out of the driveway, "This isn't so bad after all."

Unfamiliar territory

Chances are good that parents will find themselves assailed by at least one socked-in-the-stomach emotional blow during the empty nest transition period. Sometimes those moments stay in hiding for an hour, sometimes a week and sometimes until the next season.

As parents chart the unfamiliar territory of a too-quiet home, experts say it's not uncommon for some moms and dads to go from grief to clinical depression. "There is nothing wrong with asking for help from an understanding friend, pastor or therapist," DeVilliers says. Anderson agrees. "Without the right kind of help or support, mothers can spiral into a dangerous depression. The feelings of loneliness, grief and loss can be overwhelming and staggering."



Creating support systems is an integral tool for bouncing back. Maintaining groups of friends who help lift you up when those difficult moments arise is an important part of the healing process. Brouse says she's grateful for her friendships with other moms whose children have flown the coop. "I think it has helped a great deal. It is a way of talking about the new life of your child while keeping up with the new lives of your child's friends," she says. "It allows you to keep a connection to your past life while living into the new one."

If unanticipated emotional reactions begin happening more and more frequently, they could signal a deeper issue that likely has been buried for a long while beneath the chaos of childrearing — a failing marriage, an unhappy job situation or even a lack of purpose in life. DeVilliers advises parents to work on uncovering such problems before the last child leaves home.

Whatever is uncovered, chances are it has something to do with who you are apart from the "parent" moniker. Anderson says that finding a purpose and identity of your very own is one of the best ways of coping. "The first little bit in the empty house can invoke overwhelming feelings of loss, including a loss of your sense of purpose

or direction, but it is surprising how quickly women recover from this," she says. "Moms start to recognize how very much of their time, thought and emotional energy is consumed by their children."

"Some women go back to school, some go back to work. Many take up hobbies they always wanted to do but didn't have time for. Ultimately, they find ways that are unique to their personalities to fill the void created by an empty nest."

The transition period to an empty nest can be an ideal time for parents to spread their wings. They can pursue new interests, reconnect as a couple and enjoy the fact that they've launched their child down a path toward successful adulthood.

Continued on page 20

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Feathering your new empty nest

Expect the unexpected. Be prepared to experience socked-in-the-stomach sadness in unexpected places.

Give yourself something to look forward to: Plan not only for your child's departure, but also plan something special for yourself to look forward to after she leaves.

Don't anticipate lots of contact from your child. Your child is paving his own path and growing in his independence. Celebrate that fact and be happy for him.

Dive into something. Get creative, learn something new, do something new. The world is your oyster and it's your turn to dive for those pearls.

Give the household pets some extra mothering. Your pets are likely missing your child as much as you are and could use some extra hugs. Buy special doggie treats now instead of those cookies your daughter likes.

Connect with others going through the empty nest transition, too. Never forget that others may need you as much as you need them.

Create new mealtime rituals. Mealtimes are often the moments moms miss their kids the most. Take time to redesign your mealtime ritual. Begin by cooking your favorite foods and breaking out the fine china.



'I did something right'

It helps many parents to focus on the comforting aspects of launching their sons and daughters into the world. "What got me through was to keep reminding myself that my job was to raise a self-sufficient and independent person," Debrosse says. "I must have done something right if my daughter could move all the way across the country."

Annette Bohne, an Austin mother of two, agrees. "The best medicine for me in dealing with this empty nest syndrome is knowing that my sons are happy and ready for this next step in their lives," she says. "I remind myself how lucky I am to have children who are able to go away from home and flourish in a new setting."

There are perks with the newfound freedom of an empty nest, parents say. "I don't have to check the kids' schedules anymore," Fuchs says. "I can just go, see a movie, go out to eat, go to a concert. Whatever."

Overall, the transition to an empty nest is a "mixed bag of emotional tidbits," Anderson says. "While there will naturally be angst over the coming loss – and loss invokes a grief reaction – there should also be a sense of joy and accomplishment."

Mary O. Parker is a Smithville mother whose 18-year-old son, Nicolas, not only recently left the nest, but flew all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to Italy. She writes about children, nature and family issues. Katherine Burley Sturich is an Austin freelance artist and illustrator.