

# Senior Moments

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## Changing Places

By Ellie Kahn

"I want to move back to Cleveland."

It's my mother, calling from North Carolina.

"I miss my friends," she says, tearfully. "I just can't stay here."

"Here" is a cottage next to my sister's house, surrounded by trees, in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. A creek cascades by her door. Mom's beloved dog has three equally pampered canine teammates for squirrel chasing. My sister is around a lot and my brother-in-law not only shares Mom's love for "Seinfeld" reruns, but also polishes my mother's fingernails.

But it's not Mom's "home."

I hurt for my mother, as I listen, some 3,000 miles away in L.A., and I feel helpless. All I can do is try to understand what she's going through.

Mom is now 81. She started to really "feel her age" a few years ago, while still in Ohio. Her joints started hurting. She felt frustrated and scared at her memory failing. She felt alone. She started to get lost returning home from lunch with friends.

"I wish one of you would move back here," she'd say to my sister and me. She promoted Cleveland every chance she got, and I received regular *Cleveland Plain Dealer* clippings proving that Los Angeles was a dangerous place to live.

It's not an unusual gambit. "Adult children are the ones who are going to make the heroic efforts and attempts to provide daily care or monitoring, if that's necessary," said Merrill Silverstein, Ph.D., associate professor of gerontology and sociology, at USC Andrus Gerontology Center. Many seniors are retiring to warmer spots, but subsequently moving back to be near children. "The family is really the safety net for older adults."

Since neither my sister nor I were willing to move back to Ohio, we convinced Mom to live near one of us. (It wasn't a hard choice between the mountains of N.C. and the "jungles" of Los Angeles, Mom said.)

It was a courageous decision for my mother. Every transition means saying goodbye to something. Every choice involves some loss. Mom was leaving familiar territory and countless landmarks of her 81 years. She was leaving her lifelong friends.

"Friends are important when you're getting old," Mom told me. "You feel left out of things because people don't want to be bothered with you, but you know your friends accept you. Old friends help you hold on to the past, because you share so many memories."

I recalled the farewell party for Mom before she moved. Her friends shared favorite stories. "Remember the lifeguard you had such a crush on at camp?" asked Lois. "I should have married him!" my mother said, giggling, "but my father didn't approve." She dug through a box of photographs and produced a worn picture of "Bud." (He was, indeed, a hunk!) My mother told the famous story of her canoeing date with a young man on a nearby lake. The canoe suddenly tipped over and her suitor swam for his life back to the shore. Mom stood up in the waist-deep water and pulled the canoe in. Her friends have heard this story many times but still laugh. I loved watching my mother, bathed in the warmth of her deep and lasting friendships.

In trying to better understand Mom's transition, I talked to seniors I've met here in L.A., through my work as an oral historian.

"I wouldn't want to move to another place where I didn't have old friends," says Edith Meyer. Having lived here for decades, she has many friends. Her son Ron, an executive at Universal, is also nearby. I ask Edith what she'd do if she had to choose between living near friends or children. "Oh. My children. I see my children more than my friends now."

Edith just turned 80. Two of her closest friends have died in recent years. "It was very hard, because we were extremely close," she says. The key to adjusting to growing older, she adds, is staying active. "I have a pretty full life. I work at the Skirball and I go to a ceramics class and make new friends there."

I think about my mother, adjusting to a new life in North Carolina. I dial her number.

"Hello?" Mom answers, laughing. Laughing? "What's going on there?" I ask. She can barely talk she is giggling so much. I hear my sister and brother-in-law in the background, also laughing. "I have all four dogs on top of me," Mom says. "Great! What else is new?" I ask, hesitantly. "I started swimming at the health club," she reports, "and I met a nice old woman there." It's a beginning. I let out the breath I was holding and hang up with a smile of relief.

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