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jill & bill

having more with less

Story by Marcus Wilkins. Photos by Rob Hill.

For a moment, imagine a more pastoral way of life.

Instead of battling a sea of obnoxious automobiles, you inhale the crisp morning air and walk to work.

In place of wrestling a jittery shopping cart, you step through aisles of soft soil in your own garden to harvest fresh beans, crisp cabbage and vibrant squash.

And as the workweek winds down, you skip the television or the movie theater and traverse the green hills of mid-Missouri to barter with fellow farmers.

For rural sociologists Jill Lucht and Bill McKelvey, and an increasing number of Americans, incorporating elements of a simpler time has become a daily endeavor.



SIMPLE LIVING — or voluntary simplicity — is a movement that has entered the mainstream in response to global concerns about planetary ecology and conservation. It is a way of life that rejects obsessive consumerism in favor of a more self-sustaining existence focused on the environment, health, efficiency and community.

“For me it means being environmentally conscious, making choices that are good for the earth, making choices that are good for my health, and being frugal,” Lucht says. “Those are all pieces of the voluntary simplicity movement, but those things happen because of the way I grew up.”

Sorting the clutter

Although Lucht and McKelvey had very different upbringings, their lifestyles have comfortably converged. Lucht grew up on a northern Wisconsin dairy farm, while McKelvey was reared in suburban Kansas City. They were married in December 2007.

Both are research associates at MU, and they recently purchased an 880-square-foot home one and a half miles from campus. They grow much of their own food in a backyard garden and a plot in a community garden.

“Gardening offers an opportunity not only to save money, but to get in touch with nature,” McKelvey says. “People go out to dinner or to movies, and that’s a great way to entertain yourself, but in some ways it takes you away from a more simple way of life.”

Lucht puts her dairy-farm skills to good use on Friday nights at Goatsbeard Farm near Harrisburg, Mo., where she milks goats in exchange for cheese.

“It allows me to stay close to livestock and agriculture and to participate on a working farm,” she says. “It’s an important value of mine.”

Of course, Lucht and McKelvey recycle cans, bottles and paper. They also purchase clothes from consignment stores, exchange tools with friends, host neighborhood potlucks, drive fuel-efficient vehicles (when they aren’t walking or biking), and try to



Jill Lucht and Bill McKelvey regularly host potluck dinners in their home in Columbia. Clockwise from left are Lucht; Heidi Cornelius of Antigo, Wis.; Chris Willis of Columbia; McKelvey; and Joel Hartman, professor emeritus of rural sociology, of Columbia.



survive in a home without a television.

"We're not bombarded with consumer messages," says McKelvey, an MU Extension associate who works with the Healthy Lifestyle Initiative, dedicated to developing community-based nutrition, health and physical activity. "It just sort of happened. We didn't move a TV from our old place to our new place, and it really helped reduce the mental and physical clutter."

Defining the movement

Voluntary simplicity is loosely defined to encompass a variety of behaviors, practices and habits. Mary Grigsby, rural sociology professor and author of *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement* (State University of New York Press, 2004), calls it an "unbounded cultural movement."

"It doesn't have an elected leadership, rules for participation or dues that you pay," Grigsby says. "What's distinctive is how people who adopt this way of life put together the available cultural materials in unique ways."

Grigsby explains that, on the simple living spectrum, one extreme includes those who have withdrawn from the job market completely and survive on little cash by way of barter. Some of these people participate in collectives, living with others like them.

"Even then, there is a lot of diversity in ideas," Grigsby says.

Closer to the other end of the spectrum are couples such as Lucht and McKelvey, who are experimenting with preserving their own produce, as well as making other choices.

"I'm actually willing to spend more money on better but fewer clothes because I find that they last," McKelvey says. "I think I save money in the end."

Reducing materialism

The couple choreographed their thrifty marriage ceremony with pine boughs from her family's Wisconsin farm and pork, potatoes and beverages produced in Missouri. Lucht wore her mother's wedding dress, and McKelvey bought a suit he still uses for work.

As the consequences of environmental indifference become more apparent, it's no surprise that the voluntary simplicity movement has gained momentum.

For Lucht and McKelvey, it's a way of life that has cultivated happiness.

"It's not so much that we're anti materialistic, but that we're pro un-materialistic," Lucht says, laughing. "Take a moment to appreciate the playfulness of the squirrels in your yard, or really feel the sun on your cheeks on a chilly winter morning.

"That's pure bliss." ■■

Clockwise, from top left:

Lucht and McKelvey peruse the produce at a farmers' market in Columbia. As part of their simple lifestyle, they make an effort to buy fruit, vegetables and meat from local farms.

Walking one and a half miles to work, as Lucht and McKelvey do frequently, saves gas money, helps the environment and reduces stress.

Lucht grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. Now as an adult, she barter's goat milking for fresh cheese from Goatsbeard Farm near Harrisburg, Mo.



