

PARADE

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One family makes a dramatic decision to help others.

Why We Gave Away Our Home

by Kevin Salwen



The Salwens standing in front of their new house -- "the best move we ever made."

Sometimes the things we believe are holding our families together really aren't. Need proof? Let me share our story. My family is a fairly typical American foursome: My wife, Joan, and I live in Atlanta with our two teenagers, Hannah, 17, Joseph, 15, and two dogs. The kids play baseball and volleyball, and we like to ride bikes and take vacations together. Financially, we have more than most -- as a result of hard work, good education, and career luck.

Ten years ago, we moved into our dream house -- a spacious, three-story historic home -- thinking it would bring us the joy we desired. It was a beautiful place, but as our children grew up, our sense of togetherness began to fade away. In the big dream house, we scattered in different directions. When we sat down at dinner, our conversations centered more often on to-do lists than on anything meaningful. On weekends, as we drove from activity to activity, the TV in the back seat kept the kids entertained and our family from connecting. Was money the problem? Probably not. But it certainly wasn't making our lives any richer. So we did something audacious. Nuts, really.

One day when Hannah was 14, she became upset about the disparities between the world's haves and the have-nots. She challenged us to be "a family that makes a difference in the world, even if it's a small difference." Joan asked her, "What are you willing to sacrifice? Your house? Your room?" Hannah said yes to both. After talking it over as a family, we decided to sell our house and move to one that was half its size and price --and donate the difference to charity.

First, we needed to figure out where our money would go, a process that took about a year. Over bagels on Sunday mornings, the four of us gathered to learn about the world's problems and what we could do to help solve them. We narrowed down our areas of interest to three: water (over 1 billion people on the planet have no access to clean water), homelessness (as many as 3.5 million Americans a year live on the streets), and poverty (one in six people worldwide survives on about \$1 a day).

We watched videos, researched organizations, and interviewed heads of charities. We tested out what it was like to be hungry by doing hands-on activities like the 30-Hour Famine, a program run by the nonprofit World Vision. We sorted food at the local food bank, served meals to the homeless, and helped construct houses for Habitat for Humanity.

While we debated our options, we really got to know one another. I realized that Hannah and Joseph

have a great capacity for understanding complex issues. I recognized that Joseph loves huge ideas; at one point, he wondered whether we should use the entire sum to help one or two people turn their lives around. And Joan and I learned we could be honest about our imperfections with our children and let them see us struggle to make decisions.

We finally chose The Hunger Project, a U.S.-based nonprofit that works with villagers in Africa, Asia, and South America and helps them move from poverty to self-reliance. Our funds specifically went to pay for building two epicenters -- each containing a meeting place, a bank for microloans, a food-storage facility, and a health clinic. Together, the hubs would serve more than 20 villages in eastern Ghana. To complete our year of change, we traveled to meet the villagers and were blown away by their industriousness and warmth.

Back home, our friends and family kept asking us, "What is it like to live in half the space?" Before we downsized, we were a little worried. Would we feel squeezed? Or like we'd made too big a sacrifice? Two years later, I can tell you: It's the best move we ever made.

Of course, our new house required some lifestyle adjustments. In our old home, French doors opened onto a balcony and a wooded yard, and sunshine filled the kitchen. The views from our current kitchen are obscured by our neighbor's house. Our pots and pans fit in the cabinets, but that's about the extent of the space. We can't open the silverware drawer without closing the dishwasher first.

The four of us are living more tightly -- in a good way. In our previous house, the Ping-Pong table was buried in the little-used basement. Here, with nowhere else to put it, we stuck it in a walkway to the TV room, and now we play every day. Our piano had to be moved to the front room for similar reasons. Hannah often yells, "Joe, get out your guitar," and they'll duet on the only song she knows.

As we worked together on our family project, those interconnected moments became more frequent. The more we shared, the more we laughed, teased, and bonded. As Hannah said the other day, "We learned how to really trust each other."

We don't expect anyone else to copy what we did and sell their home. We had more than enough house, and it was something we could cut in half to help those in need. But most people can find some commodity in their lives they could give up, whether it's time (halving the hours of TV you watch each week and volunteering instead?) or stuff (donating half the clothes in your closet?). Like us, your family could set out to make a small difference in the world—and transform yourselves in the process.



Adapted from *"The Power of Half: One Family's Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back"* by Kevin and Hannah Salwen. To be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt on Feb. 10, 2010. [Visit thepowerofhalf.com](http://thepowerofhalf.com).

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