

Money and You: Readers offer their own stories of frugal living

by Lynn O'Shaughnessy

Recently, I was delighted by the tremendous number of e-mails that I received from readers reacting to my column. Maybe it was my confession that I once couldn't afford a can of grape juice that struck a nerve.

To provide further inspiration for those who need prodding, I'm devoting this column to comments from readers, who are faithfully following the gospel of frugality. Here goes:

Believe it or not, one of the highlights of our family life is our Wednesday sojourn to the thrift shops. I sometimes marvel at the sight of my clothing when I realize that everything I wear on any given day and 90 percent of what I have in my closet is a thrift-shop purchase. Those visits on Wednesdays are not only financially enhancing, but also cathartic in nature."

- Tom

I had a conversation with a real estate agent several years ago who told me about a couple (with no children), who each made more than \$100,000 and still rented. She was trying to help them buy a place, but they couldn't afford one. They spent everything they made and had no savings or money for a down payment. So no matter what the income, if people haven't learned to live within their means, they will always have a problem!

- Sharon, who wrote this e-mail while wearing a Liz Claiborne outfit that she bought for \$8 at a thrift store

I saw myself in your column today. I was a yuppie in the '80s, moved to San Diego for my husband's job in the '90s, where we lived on his income and had two kids. I slowly built a consulting business and now we could spend a lot but don't, partly because of those years of frugality.

Like you said buying used saves you money, but I think you missed the opportunity to also say that buying used items saves the planet's resources. We buy organic fruit and vegetables through a community-supported agriculture program. For \$20, I get a box of food direct from a local farm delivered to a nearby location. The variety and quality are excellent and I know I'm supporting local farmers who don't use chemicals to grow our food."

- Anne

About 25 years ago, my husband and I fell on financial hard times due to an injury and unemployment challenges. Necessity being the mother of invention, we learned to live very frugally while certain acquaintances and relatives lived quite high off the hog. Well, things got better for us; we both got decent jobs but continued to live beneath our means.

We are now in our early 60s, retired, enjoying long RV trips in our adequate, used, but unimpressive motor home. We are debt-free and can live comfortably on our pensions and prudent investments in our modest, comfortable, but not too fancy mortgage-free home.

Our relatives and acquaintances (notice I did not say friends), who rubbed our noses in their many fabulous material possessions all these years, have no plans to retire. Both spouses have to work full-time to keep up the payments on their beautiful, newly redecorated homes, furniture, cars, RVs, cruises, wardrobes, vacation homes, etc., etc. I am so glad that we never yielded to the pressure to keep up with the Joneses.

- A reader

If you do a sequel, you could consider adding the following:

1. For every purchase, ask if it is a "want" or a "need."
2. Can you live without any of the designated "needs"?
3. Postpone all "want" purchases for 48 hours and then re-evaluate as to their desirability.
4. Create a daily log/diary and record every purchase, no matter how small, for two weeks.
5. Label each purchase with a "W" or a "N" and have a friend/family member evaluate the selections.
6. Total each category of expenditures and multiply by two for a monthly budget.

7. Substitute half of the "wants" spending with deposits into a savings account or investment.

I teach these principles to my students to help them combat the Madison Avenue barrage, which we all must endure."

- Gary, college economics professor

I also got e-mails from a few readers who expressed frustration that they couldn't find the prepaid phone deal with Verizon Wireless that my family has used for years. Phone plans do change, but there definitely are cheap prepaid plans out there.

Readers told me about the Cingular Go phone and the prepaid plan from Tracfone. Here's the experience of one reader:

"I was provided with a free small flip phone from Cingular, and I pay \$25 for three months and 100 minutes with long distance and no roaming. If I renew before the three months is up, the remaining minutes roll over. They have a one-year plan that has even more savings."

One final note: As I was wrapping up this column, my daughter Caitlin, who is a high school senior, called me during lunch to say that her economics teacher had distributed a handout to the class on being frugal. Glancing at the paper, Caitlin was shocked to see that it was a copy of my column. When she blurted out, "That's my mom!" all her classmates suddenly began intently reading the column that they might have otherwise pitched.

Hey, whatever it takes to get the word out about being frugal is A-OK by me.

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