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Positively ready for 2011

BY KELLY ROBERSON • SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER • DECEMBER 31, 2010

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Ten months ago, life looked pretty bleak for Jim and Katie Lacona of Urbandale. Jim had just lost his father, and his mother was dying. Then he closed his family's 53-year-old business, Mama Lacona's restaurant, because of federal environmental rules that would require them to spend up to \$80,000 to replace a grease trap interceptor.

The Lacona family was frustrated and angry with government regulations and local politicians.

"No one would help me," Jim Lacona said. "They all said they were going to help, but they never helped."

Yet when the Laconas closed the door to their popular restaurant, the outpouring of support from the community was amazing, Lacona said.

Mama Lacona's soon relocated to a near-new facility that had previously housed another Urbandale restaurant.

"The opportunity just fell in my lap," Lacona said. "The guy spent \$3 million building this place, and he gave it to me essentially for nothing. And business is twice as good as the other place."

It's not always easy to pick up and move on in the face of adversity - but many people now are facing that challenge.

"There's a lot of uncertainty about the economy and what's going on in people's lives," said Dr. Gaby Cora, a spokesperson for the American Psychiatric Association and a speaker and consultant. "People have been facing more stress than in previous years, and there's a cumulative aspect to this. But it is important to count your blessings."

Sundie and Brad Ruppert and their two children were driving to Austin, Texas, in June 2008 when they received an e-mail out of the blue: Meredith Corporation was closing its books division, and five of the projects the freelance graphic design duo were working on no longer existed. Twenty minutes later, a phone call came that Brad's mentor had lost his battle with cancer.

Within the span of an hour, the family's life was topsy-turvy. But two years later, Sundie Ruppert described losing the projects as the best thing that could have happened.



MARY CHIND/THE REGISTER

Katie Lacona and daughter Olivia, 13, in the new Mama Lacona's restaurant in Urbandale. Business and family troubles turned 2010 bleak, but the Laconas are optimistic for 2011 in the site that Jim Lacona calls "twice as good as the other place."

Squelching the negative

Sometimes negativity comes from within - that self-talk that we all have, the internal critic in our heads. "You have to recognize when you are listening to that critic and replace it," said life coach Rita Perea. Perea's advice: When that happens, visualize a stop sign and replace the negative inside voice with a mantra that's meaningful, simple and positive. Perea uses "I welcome the ease." "It takes practice, because we aren't conditioned to think like that, but we need to retrain our brains," she said. "It's a technique that can be applied to any situation and helps us pick ourselves up rather quickly."

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"We've always said when the door opens a little, you stick your foot through it and see what's on the other side," Ruppert said.

The two gradually turned what had been their retail art business, Vintage Sculpture, into more of a wholesale venture. Today, some of their freelance graphic design business has returned, but sculpture is now their No. 1 priority. Their kids - who lost their regular allowances on that day in 2008 - have, at 13 and 17, created their own successful businesses (one mowing lawns, one taking care of pets), and Ruppert describes 2010 as a "blessed and bountiful year."

Part of gaining perspective and focusing less on what's lacking in our lives is uncluttering - sorting out the good and uprooting it from the bad. Part is also willpower and a renewed intent. Try these tips for acquiring a more positive outlook in 2011:

Tally your wins. Even the most miniscule accomplishments can be a good thing, said Cora, which is why she advocates writing down a "win list" of everything positive that's happened - with kids, spouse, friends and yourself. The goal, she said, is to capture everything over the course of a year that has been for the better. "You could look at terrible news every day, but you need to find some counterbalance," Cora said.

Ask yourself: What's holding you back? Sharing all that's bad with others is helpful - once in a while. But if you continually meet with friends after you've been laid off to rehash the day you lost your job and its aftereffects, perhaps its time to consider letting go of the group or the topic of conversation, Cora said.

"What you see is that people perpetuate the bad thing happening over and over again, and it's significant to try a makeover," she said. "Negative breeds more negative and won't bring more positive in. Even for people who are in therapy, if you're feeling down, there's no intervention that goes over the bad things that will make you feel better."

Life coach Rita Perea in West Des Moines uses "transition" to help clients who may be focusing on what they've lost.

"Our status quo as we knew it is not going to be the same again," Perea said. "We need to embrace the new status quo and realize that this is what life is like now."

Put your win list somewhere prominent and read it over and over. Not only is it a feel-good routine, but it will help you with the next step.

Create measurable goals. The goal list can be a mix of old and new but should contain five to 10 things to commit to. Some should be individual while others can be ideas that you do as a family or with your significant other. Did you help with a PTA fundraiser at your kids' school? That's something that probably gave you a sense of accomplishment and was tangible, so it can be easily repeated. "You want to capture that same spirit to achieve goals," Cora said. "All of a sudden, by that exercise, you'll get other fresh ideas for positive goals you can make."

Put that goal list somewhere prominent and read it over and over. Just like your win list, a goal list can also be a way to re-focus on the good things that you have and that you want to happen. If it helps, include photos or drawings and check in with both your win list and your goal list regularly - even just once a month. "Our ability to maintain our spirit as positive as possible will have a positive outcome," Cora said.

- Jane Schorer Meisner contributed to this report.

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