

ANNESTASIS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Annestasis Podcast Episode 15 - The Multi-Faceted Relocation Home from A Son's Perspective

Podcast Description: John Heckman had a unique experience moving his mother to multiple locations throughout her Alzheimer's journey. He shares the challenges and joys associated with this heartbreaking disease. As he and his siblings made choices for his mother, he is not alone feeling overwhelmed. Join us as we hear about how John traversed his mom's journey "home."

Podcast Transcript:

Stacey Sade: Hello, my friends. This is Stacy with the Annestasis podcast, where we talk about life transformations that happen through relocation. And I am thrilled to be with all of you guys today because we are going to hear a beautiful and sometimes bittersweet story from a friend of mine. I want everyone to meet John Heckman. He works with the local station of PBS in town in Memphis, Tennessee. It's wkno. And we met John professionally, through a group called City Current, which in the Memphis mid south region is a wonderful and marvelous network of human beings. And that's how John and I connected. And it was so interesting because when John and I connected, we were supposed to be having one conversation over coffee. We're supposed to talk about my company having some ad room. His company, you know what I mean? It's that. And I'm telling you, within 15 minutes, we took a left turn and we started talking about issues of the heart. And that's what this podcast is all about. So we're going to take a quick break, but when we come back, I'm going to introduce you guys to my friend and hear this rich and beautiful story that he is being so gracious to share with us that might resonate with a lot of you that have got, older loved ones, especially facing, in the dementia space. We're going to come back in a few minutes. We're going to talk to John Heckman. This is Stacy

with the Anestasis podcast, Okay, welcome back, everybody. Let me introduce you to John Heckman. John, say hello to the crowd.

John Heckman: Hello, everybody out there.

Stacey Sade: We are so glad to have you here. John's a pro in the, you know, the, broadcasting space.

John Heckman: Yes, we're the WKNO is the NPR and PBS affiliate here in Memphis, Tennessee. And, I've been there for a couple years, but I really enjoy it. It's a nonprofit and I, feel good about earning a living and helping out the community at the same time.

Stacey Sade: That's the best, isn't it? I mean, when you can earn a paycheck and you feel like you've really made a difference.

John Heckman: Absolutely.

Stacey Sade: Oh, love that. Well, John, like I said, and I've told everyone, is that our initial meeting was professional and it was very much about exposure for Anestasis. And what it turned into is I found out you have a very rich and beautiful story and we would love to hear it. Can you tell us about your mother and your journey with your mom through her downsizing process and health process?

John Heckman: Sure. well, my father passed away, four days after my 18th birthday, of cancer. And so it was just me and my mom. But I also have siblings that are ten to 15 years older than me. So they all circled back when they had kids and I think all four of them circled back and stayed in the big house, that we had.

Stacey Sade: yes, because life keeps happening even in adulthood.

John Heckman: That's exactly right.

Stacey Sade: Yes, it does.

John Heckman: but it came a point where all five of us were established, in our residences and with our families. And, so 1983, my dad passed away. And, then, four years later, the decision was made to sell the big house and for my mother to move into, ah, a building that was not a senior only building, but there was a lot of seniors that lived there and it was very nice, upscale place and so we were very comfortable, moving her there. It's called Edinburgh, but, you know, we had a huge, attic full of stuff and furniture from my grandparents, in Michigan and from my dad's family and my mom's. And, so decisions had to be made about which of the four children was going to take what. Sometimes that's an issue, but, we worked really well with each other and we never have arguments or anything like.

Stacey Sade: That, so that's a huge blessing. May I back you up just a second? in that period of time between when it became time for your mom to move and after your father died, what were some of the signs that showed you that this might be something that you're leaning into? Did your mother make those decisions? What was the images?

John Heckman: Well, it was just that, you know, a big five bedroom, four bath house for one person to take care of and to clean and upkeep. it was just too much for her. And, my sister and I that, live here in Memphis, kind, of talked to her about that, you know, hey, you know, why don't we. Why don't we get you into a smaller space where you can, you know, you won't have to do so much cleaning and, you know, you'll still have your car and you can drive. And she, she, volunteered at one of the local hospitals and, you know, she was still driving and, picking up a grandchild and volunteering at the. It's called Labanor. It's a hospital here in, Memphis that specializes on, children's, healthcare.

Stacey Sade: It's a wonderful place.

John Heckman: Yes. And, so that place, you know, it was a, it was a living room, a bedroom and a kitchen. So, so we had to make this decisions on what, what we were going to bring, what, some of the children would acquire at that time. And I'll never forget, my brother in law, once we'd gotten what we wanted, my brother in law pulled a dumpster underneath the window to the attic and just started throwing.

Stacey Sade: Yes, yes. That's great. Well, it sounds like your mom was still involved at that part about decisions. And she made a wise choice as you guys sold the benefits of why one should not be burdened with five bedrooms and four baths.

John Heckman: That's, that's true. And, she was very happy there. you know, it's kind of made me think that, you know, as I'm nearing my sixties, that I need to get rid of some of the extra stuff that I have that I'll never use, you know, and. Yeah, because my kids are not going to be interested in, you know, plates and memorabilia that that maybe was important to me. So, I plan to start downsizing now.

Stacey Sade: That's the takeaway from it. If you don't mind sharing with me, roughly how old was your mom at this time? I mean, ballpark?

John Heckman: Well, probably, about, I guess, late sixties and. Or maybe early seventies. yes. she had me when she was 43, so she was, I was the first, four kids came along, one, ah, right after the other. And I came along ten years later.

Stacey Sade: So I was just a gift. A gift, absolutely. A bonus. Well, good. Well, that is, in my opinion, sound and relatively young to be able to make that good choice.

John Heckman: Yes, absolutely. And, you know, I acquired some of her stuff and my brother moved to Mexico and I got some of his stuff that I was just going to store. And that was 20 years ago.

Stacey Sade: Yeah.

John Heckman: You still got it? Yeah. Had a sister moved to Seattle. and I got some of her stuff. Other sister moved to Colorado and left some, some stuff with me. And so I've got a I've got a full house I need to deal with.

Stacey Sade: You just inherited? Yes, well, yes. There you go. Well, I keep interrupting your story, but where you've got it is that you guys are making some hard choice. I mean, you're talking about what kind of square footage in the big house.

John Heckman: Gosh, I just.

Stacey Sade: 3800 probably, a little more than that. okay, so big. And she's coming all the way down to under 1000 sqft.

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: Okay. I mean, just. Yeah, so we're, we're looking at a quarter, if that, of her worldly possessions.

John Heckman: That's right.

Stacey Sade: How did that look for you guys? Well, you know, besides you inheriting all of it.

John Heckman: Yeah. I wish we'd had more time to, to make decisions about that. but, you know, we needed to make the move and it was planned and so we did the best we could. but, yeah, we had to, had to prioritize. You know, you can't, you only have a certain amount of space. You can't take that. and this, you can't take both china cabinets. You know, make a choice. You have to make a choice. there were some hard decisions and we were able to guide her through some of that.

Stacey Sade: May I ask what was, what did you hear when she was doing that? What were some of the hurdles that she needed to climb? Was it a sentimentality?

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: Memories attached to things.

John Heckman: what I particularly remember was the dining room table that was passed down from my father's mother or grandmother, up in McCannery, Illinois. And it was just a beautiful table and she just did not want to part with that. And, you know, we said, you know, there's not going to be room for that. We have a smaller table that you can use for your, for your sit down meals and you've got your kitchen and you can't take all the pots and pans. But, that piece in particular, she really had an emotional attachment to, but

there was no way a full dining room table. So that went to my sister, the youngest sister. And eventually, when she moved to Seattle, it came to me. Still in the family?

Stacey Sade: Still in the family, yes. Well, it's, you know, I would imagine not being a part of the Heckman clan. I would imagine all good memories of holidays and everything that table held.

John Heckman: Absolutely. There was, you know, pictures of dining, of, Thanksgiving dinners. At that dining table, you know, are some of the priceless things that, you do want to hang on to. You know, if you don't have the item itself but you have pictures that to, you know, to spur the memories of days gone by. You don't have to have the table itself if you have pictures.

Stacey Sade: Well, that's something that I have, suggested to many people before, is to have a book made in for the coffee table of the things left behind and the stories that go along with the photographs.

John Heckman: Wow, that's a great idea.

Stacey Sade: Well, it's so simple. Now. Of course, there's lots of, you know, places that you can just shoot pictures and shoot copy to. But even, I've heard there's a wedding photographer in Memphis that will do that. And just imagine just a beautiful photograph of the dining table with maybe three or four stories on the opposite page. Something that they can look back on.

John Heckman: Wow.

Stacey Sade: Yeah.

John Heckman: That's a great idea. I wish we thought of that.

Stacey Sade: Well, I mean, you know, they just, you know, come out of the air, but.

John Heckman: And for her grandchildren and great grandchildren to pass that on, to know about their history, because, you know, I was, as I mentioned, I was a late born child, so I never really knew any of my grandparents. They were. They were gone. We had, We had one, My mother's mother was. We had a kind of a wing for. We had my aunt Catherine there. And then we had, Before that, we had mom's mother. But, I was so young, and they were both very ill, at the time. But, yeah, to have those memories for future generations and people that they might not have got a chance to meet. And there's stories, but those stories are told and they don't always get written down.

Stacey Sade: It could be something beautiful that we could say, you know, we didn't do it necessarily then, but let's do it moving forward. It could be something special. Well, you have moved her to the Edinburgh, which is, It's not officially a 55 plus, but kind of a 55 plus. A beautiful high rise. It takes the yard off the table. It takes the house off the table. It really lightens, her load a great deal. How long did she stay there? What did her life look like in that space?

John Heckman: Well, she was there for quite a while. I guess from 1987 to 1992.

Stacey Sade: About five years.

John Heckman: Yeah. So. And she was active. But, it said at a point we saw that she wasn't eating properly. She would walk down to the Walgreens or whatever, and it seemed like she was just eating candy. And, wouldn't we all, really? Yes, absolutely. And I can't blame her for that. But, we decided that she needed to make another move, to a place that was near my sister, the one that moved to Seattle. And so she could walk over and see her grandchildren and her daughter. And they could. It would be easier for them to visit her and, you know, kind of keep a. Keep an eye on her and.

Stacey Sade: So this is cross country now?

John Heckman: No, no, this is just across town.

Stacey Sade: Oh, just across town, yeah. Okay.

John Heckman: That's right. Just across town. But. But the property backed up to my sister's property, so they could just walk right through. So they had someone to keep an eye. Keep an eye on her.

Stacey Sade: Lovely. Okay. Wonderful. Was she, equally, as a part of that conversation? Was that. What was her health and her faculty like at that point?

John Heckman: Not so much. She had started to show some cognitive decline at that point. we made the decision that it was time to take the keys away. But she was never really much of a driver. She didn't like she would not go down the interstate. She really, My dad taught her how to drive when they moved to Memphis. So she was never much of a driver. So that wasn't a big ask from her. Aat that point, she understood that probably better that she not be driving.

Stacey Sade: Excellent. Okay, so five years later, it's time to. The car is no longer helpful.

John Heckman: Right.

Stacey Sade: the diet is no longer helpful. She's going to move to a new facility behind your sister's house. how did that transition go? Was it still the same environment where you guys came together and made some other decisions?

John Heckman: Yes. And we had to downsize once again, because that was just, It didn't have a kitchen. It was communal dining. and so, you know, there was no. The kitchen stuff had to go. but it had a bedroom and a living room. So it was, You know, we were able to keep some of. Some of her stuff. But another downsizing experience. And that was in 1992.

Stacey Sade: Gotcha.

John Heckman: And then in 1995, we had to move her because she was never really diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but she had dementia. She didn't want to take the cognitive test because she thought people would think she was dumb or something like that. But, yeah, she was declining. So we went to a place called St. Peter's manor, with a little bit more care. And she, It's funny, she had a problem with the air conditioner, so we had to

take the knobs off and eventually had to put tape over the knobs. And, she started putting books in front of her door to block because she didn't want people she didn't know coming in. So she was definitely showing serious signs of dementia at that point.

Stacey Sade: I see. Well, let's do something real quick. Let's take a quick break.

John Heckman: Okay.

Stacey Sade: Take a pause here. And then we get to find out the rest of your mom's journey. This is Stacy with the Anestasis podcast and we are with John Heckman. He's telling us the story of his mother's journey and we are listening and gathering all kinds of good information that can help us and strengthen our own. We'll be back in just a minute.

John Heckman: This is a journey.

Stacey Sade: Let me take you on a journey.

John Heckman: There will still be this journey when you leave this planet. Leave it in a better shape than you found it. Right. And that's kind of how we live.

Stacey Sade: Watch the journey on the Kazuki network. Welcome back, everyone. We have the pleasure of listening to John Heckman, who along with his siblings had a beautiful journey, bittersweet and good, with his mother and his siblings helping her get to safer spaces in a downsizing process. Because as we know, John, it's not a one and done. she did not go from 4800 plus down to less than 1000 once.

John Heckman: That's, that's absolutely right. It was probably, six different moves and downsizing each time.

Stacey Sade: Wow, that is so. That is amazing. Well, you said at the beginning of her cognitive decline where it was really getting obvious she had just moved to a new facility and you were starting things to see real practical issues like air conditioning and fear, issues, of things like that. And so tell me where you were in that space.

John Heckman: Yeah. she was putting books in front of the door because she was afraid people, strangers would be coming in her room.

Stacey Sade: Sure.

John Heckman: so she was definitely on the path to full, ah, blown dementia. I got married in 2001.

Stacey Sade: Congratulations.

John Heckman: Thank you. Thank you. And, unfortunately, my mother was. She loved to dance and at our wedding, she fell and broke her hip.

Stacey Sade: Oh, wow. John.

John Heckman: So that she had to goop. She was in the hospital for about a month and that just with seniors, it seems like when they break their hip, that just, makes the.

Stacey Sade: It starts to snowball.

John Heckman: Yeah, that's right.

Stacey Sade: I just had that conversation today. I was talking about the importance of yoga and keeping balance for that very same reason. A fall can be more deadly than disease.

John Heckman: That's right.

Stacey Sade: Oh, wow.

John Heckman: Because then, you know, they're in a wheelchair and I, you know, then there's problems with, you know, that come from that, incontinence and things of that nature.

Stacey Sade: Absolutely come along.

John Heckman: Seem to be not related, but maybe not a result of a broken head, but when you're in a wheelchair and you're not a small and, your.

Stacey Sade: Muscles atrophy, so it's definitely a part of it. While she was at the hospital, you're a newlyweden. it became apparent to you that that facility was not able to accommodate her needs. Is that how it went?

John Heckman: That's right. We, When you're released from the hospital, you have your first in line for, you know, a full blown nursing home. and we moved to one place for, a couple months, but then we got into the, the place that we really wanted. Uh-huh and she, you know, we, this, this place we had to kind of go in. My sister and I would go in, take turns in the evening because we both worked and were very busy, but couldn't take her in ourselves. And at that point, she, we wouldn't have been able to really take care.

Stacey Sade: Of her, give her the kind of care she needed.

John Heckman: That's right. But we did go in and we took notes of, as she's taking her medicine, Has she been changed? When we got there and I changed diapers and, eventually spoon fed her, there, unfortunately, the sad part is she was sexually assaulted by, another resident.

Stacey Sade: Wow.

John Heckman: When she was there, so that was just devastating.

Stacey Sade: Sure. To everybody involved.

John Heckman: That's right. That's right.

Stacey Sade: I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sorry you guys had to experience that, that.

John Heckman: I appreciate that. So, needless to say, we found another place for which was again, another downsize. And now we're talking about this one room, you know, so, she was otherwise perfectly healthy. so she had Alzheimer's for 15 years.

Stacey Sade: Wow.

John Heckman: And, over that time, it was a steady decline. But, like I said, perfectly. No heart problems, no blood pressure, diabetes, nothing like that. She actually passed away in, in 2008, at about 83 years old. And, you know, deep in your brain, there's a part that tells your lungs to breathe and tells your heart to beat. And once those. She actually died from Alzheimer's, not from any complications or anything else.

Stacey Sade: Sure. The parts of her brain that needed to tell the involuntary function of the body die.

John Heckman: Correct.

Stacey Sade: It's almost like. Correct me if I'm wrong, because it's so, it's so hard, but it's almost like pockets of the brain deteriorate. Am I correct in that?

John Heckman: I, think that's, that's my understanding.

Stacey Sade: That's the scan that I have seen. It looks like that, random parts of the brain which. And I don't know if you had this experience some days she may have been firing with all engines and felt like, well, goodness, what are we even talking about?

John Heckman: You know? Music.

Stacey Sade: Yes.

John Heckman: Was the, maybe the part of her brain that processed auditory input, remained healthier longer. She loved Frank Sinatra.

Stacey Sade: Well, as she should.

John Heckman: As she should.

Stacey Sade: I mean, clearly a woman of good taste and distinction. Yes.

John Heckman: And I love Frank Sinatra as well. He's on my playlist. But, that you could always get a smile by playing some Frank Sinatra.

Stacey Sade: Isn't that wonderful, that soul level connection that you can make through music that nothing else will? We played Sinatra at my father's deathbed.

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: Because there were several days that it got very quiet and people that knew things said, don't let the silence be there. It's uncomfortable for them.

John Heckman: Interesting.

Stacey Sade: Continue to feel that, either with conversation or music or something, because a person inside their own head can get very scared.

John Heckman: Yes. And she passed away peacefully. And it was, you know, we knew she was going to a better place, and we were. My sister was holding her hand when she passed, and it was just, you know, it was like she went to sleep and just didn't, you know, went on to her reward. Yeah, it was hard. It's always hard. but, you know, after. After that decline over the 15 years, it was just her time to go be with my father.

Stacey Sade: Yeah. Yeah. And I'm sure that you had a great deal of peace in that place.

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: What was it that, I haven't read the book, but I heard about the book, Nancy Reagan. Is it called the long goodbye?

John Heckman: I think so, yes.

Stacey Sade: I think that. That. I thought about it many times when my father was, declining. I thought. I think some goodbyes are sudden.

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: And some goodbyes are very slow. And, there's beauty in both of them.

John Heckman: That's true.

Stacey Sade: But having loved, ones near you as you, experience your last breath, I think that there is just no more intimate, momentous.

John Heckman: That's right. That's right. And we knew the end was coming. So, you know, my brother flew, in, and my other, my two sisters, and so we were all there with her. And, you know, she, You know, I don't know if. I think she knew we were there.

Stacey Sade: Somewhere 100%, and I believe that a hundred percent.

John Heckman: She just peacefully went to sleep. No, you know, no. No pain, nothing like that. And just, it was just. It was kind of a beautiful moment.

Stacey Sade: It is a beautiful moment, ought to say.

John Heckman: But, you know, as you said, when someone dies suddenly, it's more of a shock. it's hard to see somebody decline over a number of years, but you still have them there and you can take care of them, and it's like they took care of you when you were a child, and now it's your. Now it's your turn to take care of them. And, that was fulfilling. And we had her there, and midway through, she'd have her moments of clarity. so we were happy that we had her, around for that time. Yeah. But it's, you know, everyone has to go, so. Yes, I think she went out peacefully and with her family around her.

Stacey Sade: I don't think there's any higher compliment for a mother than to have all of your offspring in a room peacefully coexisting and standing by your side. I know as a mother, I can't imagine any better send off at all. And something that I, heard in your story, which is not always the case, which is a group of adults that were working in tandem with each other toward a beautiful goal. And although your mother's journey was toward a cognitive decline and ultimately death, it sounded like each space gave you a little bit of peace, a little bit of more peace. Even though she was offloading possessions.

John Heckman: That's right.

Stacey Sade: that you guys could actually rest at night knowing that she was perceivably, in good hands.

John Heckman: Absolutely. Absolutely. And some places were better than others.

Stacey Sade: Oh, yeah.

John Heckman: but, you know, we wouldn't have been able to take her, take her in. The two of us that lived here worked, demanding jobs, and so we had, to trust, you know, the people that we. At the, at the places where she. Where she stayed. And we did. There's some, you know, there's some that were just wonderful and some that were mediocre, and some that just really weren't that good. But, so you really have to, do your homework and find the right place.

Stacey Sade: Yes. Something else I also heard that I think is a prescription for success is also to be present.

John Heckman: Yes.

Stacey Sade: I think that that is lovely, is to know that not only even though your mother was not in your living room in a hospital bed, you were still very active in her care.

John Heckman: That's right. We took turns going up each night.

John Heckman: and, took notes about what medicines she'd taken and what the conditions were. you know, that, and we started that really when she was in the hospital, because you never want to leave anybody in the hospital if you can help it.

Stacey Sade: Sure. No, absolutely. Without an advocate.

John Heckman: Without an advocate. So, we started taking notes when she was in the hospital. And we just continued that after she was released, since we were going up, taking turns going up each night.

Stacey Sade: Well, some takeaways from your story are. Is to have a plan and have a system in place, that benefits everybody involved. Even the best healthcare people, are strung pretty thinly these days. I mean, really and truly. my mother recently had a knee replacement surgery, and it was during a snowstorm, and bless her heart, somebody came and checked her in the middle of the night. That was from the nurse, I mean, from the, infant ward. And she had her scrubs on, like one taking care of a tiny baby. But the truth was, it was a snowstorm, and they were shorthanded. And so we operated together, to create a safe atmosphere for my mother. And I know that that is just so important. And you guys created a system.

John Heckman: Yes, that's right.

Stacey Sade: I love that. I love that. Well, your mother was obviously very beloved.

John Heckman: Oh, absolutely.

Stacey Sade: And very treasured. And her legacy is solid with you and, your siblings. I think that is beautiful.

John Heckman: One things that we have, we all have, she was an artist. She was a very fine artist. She actually went to the art institute in Chicago, when she met my father, he was, working there. His family owned parking lot, parking lots. And so, but they met there, and she continued pursuing her art, throughout her life. So we all have pictures. she painted a picture of me as one of my prized possessions. And, she painted pictures of the other four, the older kids. And she loved to paint flowers and nature scenes. So we all have her art hanging on our walls.

Stacey Sade: What a beautiful way to remember her. Well, this is lovely. And, I even learned more than I knew before about your story with your mom. I want to thank you. John. there's so many people out there that are sitting where you were a number of years ago, that needed your story to strengthen them as they make, different journeys. The transformation through relocation, is significant, and it's important and it's vital. And it's not easy. No, it's not easy. But your story is very inspiring to me and will be to other people.

John Heckman: Well, Stacey, I appreciate you having me on. I've really enjoyed it.

Stacey Sade: Well, me, too. And thank you for coming, and being with us. So, friends, we are going to close it out here, but we want to thank John Heckman of WKNO, who is doing good work in the Memphis and mid south area, and his lovely and transparent and vulnerable story about his journey with his mother. I mean, I have children. I want my children to have the same story about me. Thank you for your time, and thank everybody for tuning in and listening. We'll be back with more stories about lives that are changed through this relocation process. And I am Stacy Saed. This is Anna Stasis. You can find us in all places that you can get a podcast. The website is annestasis.com. please look us up and find us and we look forward to being with you soon. Thanks, everybody.