

# Talking About Retirement

## James and Denise's Story

*"It doesn't matter how many people tell you that they are busy all the time in retirement you don't really understand what they do until you retire yourself – and it's this nice thing – we are busy people! We are retired! In that sense it's the nicer times now." – James Dent*

James spent the last twenty years of his working life abroad. He and Denise became adept at moving house and making new friends, a skill which has served them well in retirement. James worked for an international company as one of their top executives. He travelled constantly. He never had a holiday that lasted more than a week – and even then he spent a good deal of his time on his computer or on the telephone to the office.

They have two sons. One is married to a French woman and lives in France with their 3 children aged 10, 7 and 5. The children are being brought up French speaking so one challenge for James and Denise is to improve their French. Their other son is unmarried.

Denise's sister, who is older than her, suffers with dementia and Denise has been involved, first of all with caring for her, and then arranging for her to be looked after

## Talking About Retirement

in a suitable care home. She has also helped look after her nephew who recently went through a patch of ill health.

After he retired James became involved in several local charities and a lot of his spare time is now spent working with these charities. However, they are finding time to take lots of holidays – making up for all the times when James was working and holidays didn't really happen.

James and Denise are both 63. They are post-retirees.

### **Adjusting to a 'cold turkey' retirement**

James had a 'cold turkey' retirement, one day he was working full time, the next day he was retired. He didn't have a gradual easing away from work that several post retirees had found so helpful. Did this 'sudden' retirement life take some adjusting to? *“Well, I had to learn to slow down. I'd been used to commuting and I'd done a lot of travelling so one of the adjustments was not having that endless round of short trips away, long trips away and the whole plan of things laid out. There it was – blank – and had to be filled. Whereas, previously my agenda was not my own but it had all been there and it was a question of squeeze everything in. And whilst that working agenda can be bothersome it does give a structure to your life – and when you retire suddenly the time's empty. So there was a tempo adjustment that took a little while.”*

# Talking About Retirement

## **What helped with the adjustment?**

What, if anything, helped James with the adjustment? *“I was glad that I retired in March because it’s a time when it was all the outside stuff – there’s all the garden, there’s golf, there’s walking, there’s all sorts of things. And I think a lot of people retire at the end of the year. Unless they go away very smartly I think January or February could be quite a difficult adjustment period. It’s much easier to do it in spring.”*

However, James did admit: *“Slowing down and not having this endless agenda of stuff stretching out for a year ahead was a bit unnerving.”*

## **It’s not loss of status – it’s loss of usefulness**

Having been an important person in the organisation that he worked for did James miss the status he had had there? *“I don’t think I specifically miss the status, no – but I miss the pressure; yes, I miss a lot of people coming up and asking things, wanting things and wanting to involve me. I miss that – and I separate that out from a feeling of importance because I’ve seen an awful lot of people to whom these things are terribly important, but I honestly think they weren’t for me. But I did like being involved and I liked being useful and losing that left a bit of a hole sometimes.”*

## **How was the feeling of usefulness replaced?**

## Talking About Retirement

I was interested to find out what James had done to replace the feeling of usefulness he had so enjoyed when he worked: *“Well, I deliberately set out to get on the board of two or three charities to use such financial skills as I’ve still got. My idea was that this would give me some structure. It would give me some of the same sort of work, being on the board, doing things, that I had always done for so long, without it being too onerous, too full time. And it’s worked very well and helped during the transition phase.”*

### **Becoming engaged in his post-retirement work before he retired**

James thought about what he might do in retirement long before he retired. He wanted to become involved in the local community and one way he did this was to volunteer to work with local charities: *“I was taking on the charity work before I retired – during the last two years of working. I thought it was good to take the opportunity to actually be doing those things before I retired.”* How important did James feel it was to become involved in the charitable work pre-retirement: *“Well, firstly when you retire you start losing contacts – you’re much more attractive when you’re still actually working. Secondly there’s a hiatus if you leave it until you retire whilst you try to do this thing that, in principle, you want to do after retirement but haven’t quite got round to.”*

Did he find it difficult fitting the charity work in with his work during the two years he was still working? *“It wasn’t easy but as long as I was there when they needed it, it didn’t really matter. What I’m really happy about is that I took opportunities in*

## Talking About Retirement

*those final couple of years so that I was already involved and wanting to spend more time on those things when I retired.”*

### **Did James enjoy his work with charities?**

Over the years I've had negative feedback from people about working with charities; frustrations of dealing with committees and other committee members who may not be used to the speedy and efficient way that businesses work. Did James find working with charities frustrating? *“I suppose, in a way, things do take too long and I do get impatient about that, but one has to recognise that, as a non-executive director, whether it's a charity or a business, one is not in executive control. One has to work with people who are there and the culture that's there. So I try and move things along and I'm honest about things when I think they are taking too long, or taking too much care to get it right when they should just be moving ahead with what we've got.”*

James did give up on one of the charities he was working with: *“It was a bit chaotic. But I think the answer is, if you're really unhappy you find something that suits you better. I've found, once you start, you get approached, so you can move on. Apart from the one I left I've found that the charities that I've worked with have been very business-like – it's not a bunch of amateurs.”*

### **How long did it take James to adjust to retirement?**

## Talking About Retirement

How long was it before James felt comfortable with his retirement life? *“It’s one of those things that frequently you look at and say ‘now I’m fully comfortable with it’ and then, a few months later, you realise that you’re still not actually there. It certainly took months. Maybe I would say a year.”*

### **Does James wish that he had done anything differently when he was going into retirement?**

Moving into retirement is there anything that James wishes that he had done differently? *“Looking back, if there’s one thing I would have done differently is that I would have proposed to the company that I move to two weeks a month. The guts of the job I could have done in two weeks a month. Had I done that I think they would have jumped at it and I think that would have given me a better transition. Being involved with charity work, helped me to do that, but I needed the transition – definitely.”* Whilst I am looking at sudden retirement from James’s point of view there is also the point of view of the employer – they might be very receptive to providing a key worker with a gradual retirement. After all, it allows them an adjustment period too.

### **How was it for Denise?**

Denise’s job had been to look after James. When he was posted abroad Denise went with him. She got used to moving around the world, building a home for James in whatever country they happened to be in. She has a flair for interior design and decorating and enjoyed choosing their homes and ‘doing them up’: *“When we got*

## Talking About Retirement

*back to the UK I was involved looking after my sister and that took a lot of time. She's in a home now, which really does look after her well, and I've been able to let go more and that's freed up my time. And when we came back we bought this house and renovating that was an eighteen month project. And I play golf. So I keep busy."*

Denise would be the first to admit that her life in retirement has changed little, compared with the drastic changes that have taken place in James's life.

### **Adjusting to having James at home all the time**

Like every other interviewee Denise went through her own period of adjustment - getting used to having James around the whole time: *"My main one was lunchtime – well, we stop much more than we used to, or I used to! Now we have a routine for when we're both together. Partly it was adjusting to James being at home the whole time. James, how long would you say it took to work through the problem?"* Rather amusingly James's reply was: *"I didn't know you had this difficulty."* Denise went on: *"I suppose it took six weeks or so, that's all. We didn't talk about it – obviously. Well, before I'd always been on my own and done what I wanted to do, and not necessarily stopped much for lunch, so it was different."*

But working through it has enabled them to strengthen their relationship. James: *"Fortunately we share a lot of things, like golf and so it's been good that we've had more time together. I think there were times when we had strains – when we were on top of each other, trying to do things together in the kitchen or whatever. Those strains wouldn't have been there when I was out from 6.30am to 8.00pm. But, on the*

## Talking About Retirement

*whole, it's been good and very positive because we can actually do more things together. We have good times together – it's been terrific."*

And holidays are great now!

When he worked James rarely took a proper holiday: *"It was very hectic, for much of my working life holidays were very hectic. I rarely took longer than a week."* The pace of their holiday life is much calmer now, instead of saying 'how late can I leave it and not quite miss the plane?' they can now aim to arrive at the airport in plenty of time!

### **27 Things to do before you die**

The firm that James worked for sent their senior executives on a conference to Costa Rica. One of the tasks they were set was to write a list of the 27 things they would like to do before they died: *"You sat on the deck of a boat, off the coast of Costa Rica, and you had to think about it, and write down this list of 27 things to do before you die. And I did it and I told Denise about it and she did it. I refused to show her my list until she'd done hers. Then we showed our lists to each other – I think it was Christmas Day. It seemed mind boggling that I'd got 27 things but actually, when you think about it, they don't have to be very big things. For example, it could be to read a book that you've always wanted to read but never had the time."*

I was intrigued to know if James and Denise's lists were similar – did they want to do the same 27 things before they died? Denise: *"A surprising number were the same."*

## Talking About Retirement

*There were others that weren't the same but similar, for example James wanted to learn Latin and I wanted to learn Italian!"*

Was there comfort in knowing that they were approaching retirement and still wanted, mostly, to do the same things? James: *"It was a great comfort actually to find that there was a commonality and yet some individual things as well. It's not a bad thing for couples to do but you've got to do your lists separately, if you want that comfort – no conferring!"*

Having the list helped them to focus on what they would both like to do in retirement. It also helped them to determine what they didn't want to do. James: *"I had sailing on my list and, fortunately, before I went out and bought a boat, I had an opportunity to do some blue water sailing. I helped crew a boat from Bermuda to Rhode Island for four or five days and I discovered I didn't like it that much after all and Denise hated it. So you do work through things. The list is evolving."*

The list has changed. Some of the 27 things have been crossed off and others have been added. Did James feel that going through this exercise helped him in his retirement planning? *"I did it two years before I retired. The timing was quite good. It actually moved forward my thinking about retirement at 60. And it made one or two other people who were of a similar age wake up as well and think: Good Heavens, I'd better get on with planning my retirement. They suddenly see that there is a hole out there - a retirement hole that will need filling and it's time to get moving. So it's very helpful. It sounds trivial things, but it actually was very helpful."*

# Talking About Retirement

## **Making friends with our grandchildren**

What was the most important thing on their list? Jean: *“Well, the most important thing on my list was ‘To make friends with my grandchildren’.”*

When James was working, especially in the later years when they were abroad, they felt that they just didn't have the opportunity to build a strong relationship with their grandchildren. James: *“Our grandchildren live in France and, by the nature of their lives and our lives when I was working, it meant that we hardly saw each other. We'd talk on the phone, but we weren't really an important part of their lives.”* How important was this to James and Denise? James: *“Very. To digress a little bit, our sons never knew grandparents really – a combination of things – we were both children of older parents, some had died, and some were estranged, and so they never had a grandparent support group. And it was something missing for us – and for them. And our lifestyle, when I worked, had taken us away from our grandchildren and we both woke up to the fact that it would require real time and effort for us to bridge that gap and create something which we hadn't been able to do until I retired.”*

How is it working? Denise: *“It's working very well. They are French speakers – totally French speakers. Our French wasn't good so it's taken time and effort for us to improve our French. But it was the most important project, post retirement, and one that we have consistently worked at. We had the seven year old fly across – never been on a plane before – flew across on his own and spent a week with us.”*

# Talking About Retirement

## **Pre-planning a retirement location**

When they came back from abroad James had 4 years left before he retired. He knew he would be based in London for that 4 years but they decided not to live in London:

*“When we came back to the UK what we very deliberately did was look for a house that was going to be our retirement home for a number of years. We ignored completely location of my office and travel to the office on the basis we would sort that out and we said ‘We will find the home we want and get it ready and when I retire we will have established ourselves in the new community’. We’d spent 20 years abroad so we hadn’t established a place, a community in the UK, to settle in. So, rather than settle in London, and then move on retirement and have to start all over again, we established ourselves here, knowing we wouldn’t have to recreate anything when I retired.”* Has it worked well for them? *“Yes it has. I know many other people take a different view and go and live abroad or in the country, whatever, but then that does mean that you’ve suddenly got to work hard at it.”*

## **Time to plan**

When he worked James would get up at 4.30 in the morning: *“I used to read and write. Even when I worked I always read for half an hour or so quietly and then I used to do all my e-mails and paperwork before I left at quarter past six. Now I don’t do that. I get up at half past five – I still read for about three quarters of an hour, but the paperwork doesn’t always get done! It just seems to take longer to do things.”* I suspect that that is partly because there is more time to do things in. Also, as James pointed out, if you have been a busy executive you often had people to do things for

## Talking About Retirement

you; when you retire you have to do it for yourself: *“The holidays! I have to plan it all myself. I never realised how long it took because I never had to do it. When I worked there was someone, somewhere in the organisation whose job it was to look after people like me and organise everything. I’d no idea what it took to go on the internet and look at prices – no idea! So things take longer than they used to.”*

### **Swapping the indoors for the outdoors**

Having grown up on a farm James was passionate about the outdoors, but during his working life he never had the chance to spend a great deal of time out of doors: *“And you know the dreadful thing in the winter, which is that you never see the house in the daylight! From one month to another, except at weekends. You leave in the dark and you get home in the dark. So, for me, one of the things I was really looking forward to in retirement was being able to enjoy the daylight and the fresh air.”* And has this happened? *“Oh yes. I’d been brought up a country lad. I’d always spent a lot of time outdoors as a boy and a teenager and I couldn’t wait to be outside when I wanted to be, so that is really special for me. Whether I’m in the garden or golfing or walking. It’s great.”*

### **Risk taking**

I sensed a dichotomy in James and Denise’s attitude to risk. On the one hand James has always been something of a risk taker and now that he is older he still takes risks: *“I think as one gets older it’s very clear that people take more care and usually become physically more risk averse. At the same time I just feel more relaxed about it*

## Talking About Retirement

*– and the responsibilities aren't there in terms of having to take care of a family.*

*Denise is secure, the boys are grown up and it's been a good innings so – what the heck!" But, having said all that Denise told me: "He does take more care with his driving – he drives a little slower."*

### **What of the future?**

James and Denise are still in the early stages of their retirement. What do they want to do now that they are settled into their retirement life? Denise: *"I think we'll just keep on doing more of the same. We'll keep on adding to the list. With the children and grandchildren we want to be someone they want to be around, not someone who is just going to sit there and go to sleep."* They made many friends around the world when James was working and keeping contact with them is important. Denise: *"We want to maintain contact with all the people we've got to know over the years because you realise how important those friendships are."*

### **What's good about their retirement life?**

Denise: *"I think we're so lucky – I didn't really have a romantic notion of what retirement would be like. I was just looking forward to having James at home more."*

James: *"It's being busier than I envisaged and not having to worry about how I might fill my time. That was one of my fears but it's not materialised. It doesn't matter how many people tell you that they are busy all the time in retirement, you don't really*

## Talking About Retirement

*understand what they do until you retire yourself – and it's this nice thing – we are busy people! We are retired! In that sense it's the nicer times now."*