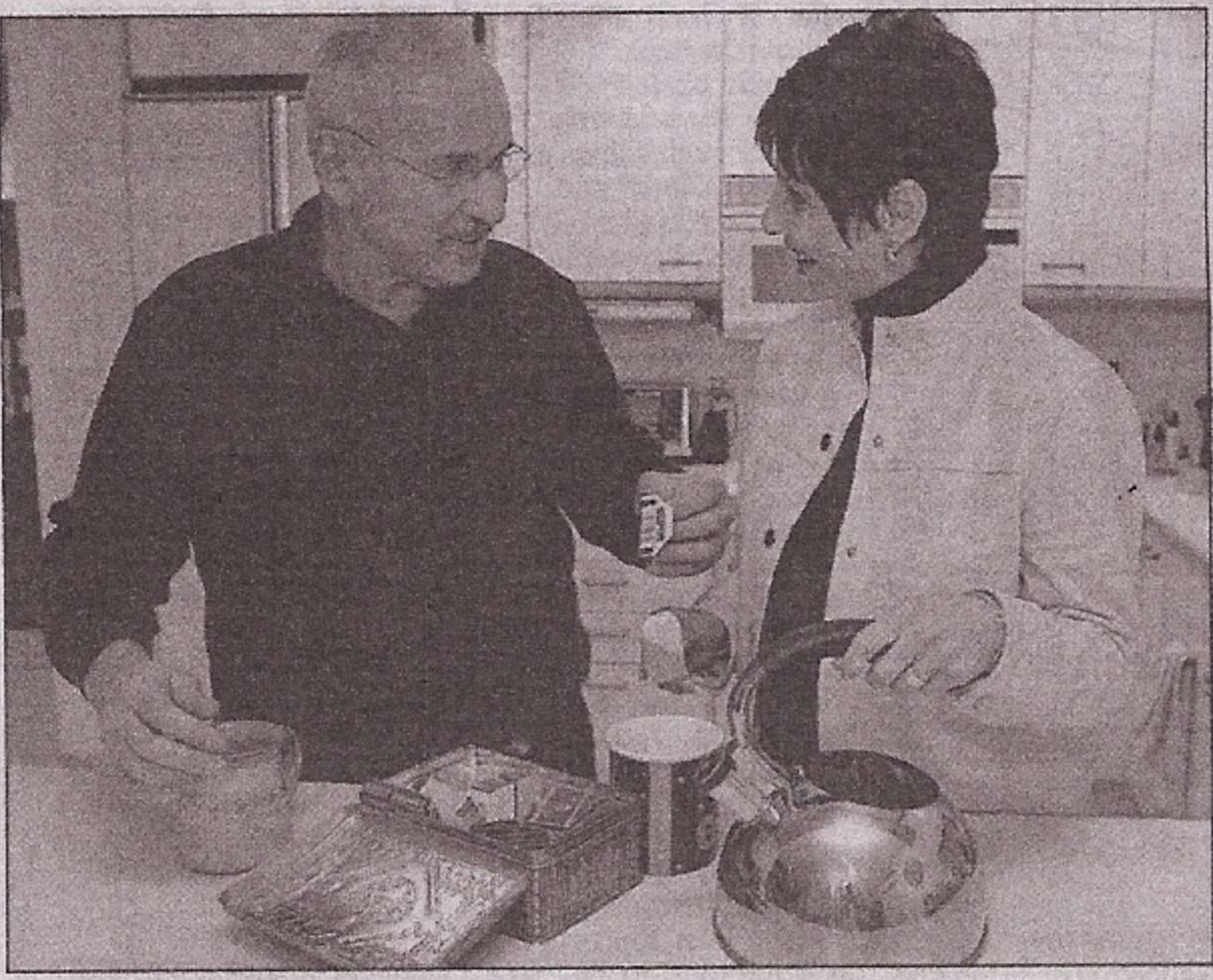

NEWSDAY PHOTO / KATHY KMONICEK

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Hewlett residents Ben Weisel and his wife, Billie Barbash, at left, partners in a pest control business, have planned methodically for one outliving the other. Above, Kate Kreiss of Lynbrook, a recently retired teacher, chose a pension option that also could benefit her husband, Stephen.

Planning for **the inevitable**

It's difficult but important to be forthright in facing the fact that one spouse will outlive the other

BY BETTINA MARKS

Billie Barbash and Ben Weisel, who have been married for 24 years, own and operate a successful pest control business in Glendale.

Ben, 64, is beginning to "slow down a bit," limiting his working hours and thinking about retirement — part-time, at least. Billie, 58, is still working full-time, but the Hewlett couple is "in talks" with each other about full retirement in 10 years or so.

Each has children who work full-time in the business and will take it over when they retire completely. They are discussing their options with regard to relocating, buying a second home and activities they may pursue together and individually, such as traveling, volunteering, hobbies and adult education classes.

They also are realistic — recognizing that their personal and financial plans eventually need to take into account the likelihood that one spouse will outlive the other. So over the past five years they have been consulting regularly with an attorney and a financial adviser to update their wills and estate plans. They have identical individual wills for their personal effects, where if one pre-deceases the other, everything is split 50/50 between the surviving spouse and the children (they collectively have five children from previous marriages); there are separate wills covering their business assets.

They have health insurance through their business and a private life insurance policy to benefit all the kids. Billie has long-term disability insurance and they are currently reworking Ben's long-term disability insurance, which is a little more complex due to some recent health issues. And these documents are stored in a safe location that each can access easily.

Barbash and Weisel's extensive retirement plans reflect an unusual forthrightness in confronting a stark demographic fact: the difference in life expectancy between men and women. According to the Social Security Administration, a man at 50 is expected to live, on average, another 27.6 years, while women that age will average 31.6 more years. So even if spouses are the about the same age, couples need to consider retirement plans that assume one will outlive the other.

"We each came from different backgrounds and forged together both our personal and professional lives," Barbash said. "We concentrated on our common goals and negotiated with each other to find the best method of achieving them."

Widows 'in the dark'

Yet many couples are reluctant to have such conversations, eventually leaving one spouse — usually the wife — to suddenly take on the family's financial affairs without much preparation. Even if a woman contributed to household income, her husband may have assumed full responsibility for the family's welfare, leaving his spouse in the dark about these issues.

The key to addressing such situations is to speak about the "unspoken" with a financial planner, insurance agent and an attorney specializing in estate planning, experts say.

Gail Busillo, a social worker at North Shore University's Mental Health Outpatient Clinic in Manhasset, encourages older spouses to work together by

Some resources, tips from experts

Financial planning for individual spouses later in life requires analyzing a wide range of personal and legal issues. Here are some tips from experts and resources that may help older couples:

■ While many couples are deciding to write separate wills, contesting of wills by other family members" is becoming more prevalent each year," Terence E. Smolev, a partner in the Mineola law firm of Forchelli, Curto, Schwartz, Mineo, Carlino & Cohn LLP. To avoid such problems, Smolev suggests writing to family members to explain your decisions and the reasons behind them.

If you anticipate complications (say, with grown children from previous marriages), Smolev advises that, in addition to having a will, you set up a living trust with a trustee to help avoid probate and make contesting the will harder.

■ If you have a pension and are considering taking less than the full monthly allotment to defer some money for your spouse, another option is to take the full pension and use some of it to buy life insurance, which would provide for your spouse in the event of your death, said Rob Belvedere Jr., a financial planner at Mass Mutual Insurance Group in Garden City.

A life insurance policy creates an "instant estate" when time and / or other circumstances can keep you from accumulating sufficient assets to care for your loved ones, Belvedere said.

"As a rule of thumb," he said, "your life insurance policy is based on 10 to 12 times your current income."

■ Social Security benefits often change when one spouse dies, so check with the agency about various provisions, such as survivor's benefits and benefits for disabled spouses or children. Call 800-772-1213 to inquire about benefits and eligibility.

■ If you need legal advice but have budget constraints, there are some free legal services available in the Long Island-Queens region, such as the Nassau Law Services' Senior Citizens Project in Hempstead (516-292-8088); Legal Aid Senior Citizens Inc. in Bay Shore (631-854-0401); and Legal Aid office in Kew Gardens (718-286-2450).

■ For those who need support after losing a spouse, there are several local bereavement groups to help survivors regain their emotional footing while they reconfigure a financial plan.

Such groups, which sometimes charge fees, include the JCC of the Greater Five Towns (516-569-6733); North Shore University Hospital's bereavement group in Manhasset (516-562-4927); and the Catholic Health Service of Long Island's Good Shepherd Hospice, with offices in Port Jefferson Station, Babylon and Carle Place (631-474-5500).

— BETTINA MARKS

NEWSDAY PHOTO / BILL DAVIS

Lisa Stern, left, a social worker at the Jewish Community Center in Cedarhurst, counsels widows confronting financial questions amid their emotional losses. Above, she talks with Esther Tanner, center, and Anna Feit of Lawrence.

planning, paying bills and sharing the filing system as an ongoing part of living.

If a husband handles all the couple's financial matters, he may be worried about dying first yet afraid to discuss the subject with her. The "protected" wife also may be afraid to discuss the issue with him. "Isn't it be better to be prepared than to have to learn it all at the last minute and under pressure?" Busillo asks.

People often fail to plan, "but no one plans to fail," adds Rob Belvedere Jr., a financial planner at Mass Mutual Insurance Group in Garden City.

For starters, everyone with significant assets should have a will, advises Terence E. Smolev, a partner in the Mineola law firm of Forchelli, Curto, Schwartz, Mineo, Carlino & Cohn, LLP. Many couples have simple wills through which they leave their assets to each other, and if both die, to their children equally; each spouse should have his or her own will.

One way to be prepared in the event of sudden death or disability is called a "fire drill" approach to planning, said Belvedere. Go over the "what ifs" in case of an emergency; couples over 50, especially, should be able to talk about these issues realistically.

"The barometer for preparing for your financial security," Belvedere said, "should be based upon whether you love someone, a spouse or lover, or something, like your business."

By answering a basic questionnaire that profiles their financial situation, a couple can assess their needs and make educated projections for the future, Belvedere said. Included in this query are considerations for college funding, retirement, asset allocation, disability income, and long-term care.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / BILL DAVIS

Financial planner Rob Belvedere Jr., with the Mass Mutual Insurance Group in Garden City, left, and estate attorney Terence E. Smolev, a partner in a Mineola law firm.

Stretching pensions

Pension recipients, particularly public employees, may have more options in stretching their retirement income for a surviving spouse.

For example, retired teachers at age 65 in New York can opt to take 100 percent of their monthly pension allotments due at retirement, and if they were to die, their spouse would get nothing — or, they could take 80 percent at the time of retirement and if they died, their spouses would get 50 percent for the rest of their lives.

Kate Kreiss of Lynbrook is one recently retired teacher who chose to take less than the 100 percent monthly pension allotment. Instead, Kreiss, 64, who was a local public school history teacher and guidance counselor for 21 years, chose a "pop-up" plan, which states that if she dies first, her husband will continue to collect the same income, but if he dies first, the pension will "pop-up" to the 100 percent monthly stipend for her to collect.

Her husband, Stephen, 65, left the hosiery business in which he worked for 35 years and returned to school at Hofstra University at age 59 to get a degree in accounting. He now works at a local accounting firm that provides bookkeeping and accounting services for several businesses, while Kate works as a counselor and consultant three days a week at a private school in Brooklyn. The Kreisses, who have been married 43 years, each have separate life insurance policies and long-term health care insurance.

"Financial planning has been an ongoing process that reflects the team effort that we define as our marriage," said Kate Kreiss, adding that the couple live near their three children and have no plan to relocate.

Kate noted that her father was an accountant who appeared to have shared his financial knowledge and details of the family finances with her mother, an unusual relationship for a couple of their generation, both born in the early 1900s. She recalled that her 90-year-old mother once gave her a list of questions to ask a financial planner after her father was stricken with Alzheimer's disease. "I had a role model in my parents, who did their financial planning together," Kate said.

Grieve, then decide

Yet, that's not the situation many older women find themselves in, says Lisa Stern, a licensed social worker at the Jewish Community Center in Cedarhurst, who counsels groups of widows confronting financial concerns amid their emotional losses.

Many widows in her groups, ranging in age from 55 to 75, say they never spoke about their finances with their husbands, Stern said. Others, she said, found it difficult to manage their finances — despite having enough money — often asking their children to take over their financial affairs, thus transferring their dependence from spouses to offspring.

When a spouse dies, it's often advisable to wait for at least two months, after a sufficient grieving period, before considering major financial decisions, Stern said.

Stern's short-term counseling programs are designed for groups of 30, where ideas are shared and new friendships are made. The friendships help assuage pain and enable widows to move forward.

Within a year, Stern said, most are back on their feet.

Bettina Marks is a freelance writer.