

Alone and buried by possessions

Hoarding, a version of obsessive-compulsive disorder that can consume a household, is a social problem that is slowly being recognized



There was little room in the Gastons' kitchen when a city inspector entered the South Side home in May. (Alex Garcia, Chicago Tribune / August 10, 2010)

By Kristen Mack, Tribune reporter

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On their wedding day, Jesse and Thelma Gaston decided all they needed was each other.

She was a classically trained musician and an aspiring opera singer who gave up her career to be with him, family members said. He went to grad school while working a day job in order to become a chemist and to better provide for her.

They never had kids. They did make room to worship God, crafting a makeshift church in their basement, where they were the only congregants.

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Early on, guests who visited their Grand Crossing home were invited inside, siblings said. But as years went by, visits were limited to the porch, and then the yard. Over time, Jesse and Thelma deliberately distanced themselves from family, relatives recalled. It was a solitary life they chose.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/health/ct-met-hoarders-0811-20100810,0,4243516.story>

Their isolation was so deep that it was more than a week before the Gastons were found buried alive under a mound of their things with what appeared to be rat bites on their bodies.

They were hoarders, and apparently had been for years. Six weeks later, Jesse, 76, died at [Jackson Park](#) Hospital of cancer. Cook County is now Thelma's guardian. The 79-year-old was too frail to make it to Jesse's funeral.

[Tribune reporter Kristen Mack considers why people hoard, and why we have such a morbid fascination with these stories, online at Trib Nation.](#)

In Skokie last month, Marie Davis, 79, was found dead on top of a pile of her possessions. Rescuers had to drill a hole through the roof and tunnel inside to find her body resting on debris piled three feet from the ceiling of her home. Davis, who was once an Avon saleswoman and married to a lieutenant in the Skokie Police Department, also lived her final days in seclusion, neighbors said.

Davis and the Gastons led functional lives before their illness, hoarding, a version of obsessive-compulsive disorder, consumed them.

Their isolation later in life is typical of hoarders, who tend to have difficulty developing relationships, experts said. Hoarders find comfort in objects, which they see as more trustworthy than people who can let you down, said Mark Pfeffer, who heads the Panic Anxiety Recovery Center. Hoarders are often living with other forms of mental illness or social phobia, making it difficult for them to distinguish between treasure and trash.

While there is a morbid fascination with hoarding, Americans have been slow to recognize it as a social problem, said Christiana Bratiotis, the director of the Hoarding Research Project at Boston University. With adults living longer and relatives residing further away, it is often neighbors who first see signs of a problem, but they may be reluctant to interfere. Experts say even the simplest cases require both family and outsider help.

"It requires a social and community response," Bratiotis said.

Thelma Gaston, 79, who is blind and has [diabetes](#), now lives in a North Side nursing home. She acknowledges she doesn't remember much about her last days in her Grand Crossing home on Chicago's South Side, said Joan Stewart, the county's case manager for the Gastons.

There are still holes in the couple's life no one can fill, said [Robert Harris](#), the public guardian. Hoarders who have been rescued are often in such poor mental and physical condition that it can be difficult for researchers and social workers to track the path of their illness, experts say.

Jesse Gaston's niece said her mother tried for years to intervene and be a part of the couple's lives, but was repeatedly rebuffed. "My mother never gave up on him," Doris Funches said. "She didn't know how to fix it. She has a lot of regrets now, but it's too late for that."

Although neighbors noticed the mess in the Gaston's backyard — old refrigerators, trash piled in a dozen garbage cans — no one realized the extent of the chaos inside their home.

Neighbors only called authorities when mail piled up on the porch and Jesse's car gathered parking tickets. By that

point the couple had been trapped for up to a week, officials said.

Both Davis and the Gastons' homes amassed decades' worth of belongings stacked floor-to-ceiling: crumpled clothes, empty soup cans, disintegrated paper, furnishings neighbors discarded that they treasured. Marie Davis' neighbors remember her as a pack rat, a scavenger who occasionally exhibited odd behavior, but say they mostly recall her gentle nature.

Davis, who lived in her home for more than 35 years, looked after her neighbors' places while they were away on vacation. She would notify them if their car had been broken into or help comb the streets of Skokie for a missing dog.

"She had a good [heart](#). There's no doubt about it," Marge Focht said.

Years ago, Davis was a frequent sight on the block, walking her dog, going door-to-door selling Avon products. The last couple of years, however, she only came out at night. Neighbors were never allowed inside her house.

"I told her she needed help. This is a sickness with you," said Pat Tischler, who lives across the street. Davis told her, "I know, I'm working on it," Tischler said.

About two weeks before Davis' body was found, she knocked on neighbor Cathy Pauley's door with two empty gallon water jugs in hand and asked her to fill them. Pauley carried the jugs over and left them on the brown Oldsmobile parked in the driveway, knowing she wouldn't be let in.

That kind of self-induced seclusion likely comes from hoarders' own embarrassment, experts say. While hoarders lack insight about their condition, there's a recognition that others would not find it acceptable, Bratiotis said.

"They figure out how to live in their environment," she said. "There's shame of letting someone in because they don't want to risk having to get rid of their things."

Family members say there is some hope Thelma Gaston can have a better life. Recently, Gaston expressed regret for losing touch.

"She wanted us to be in her life," said David O'Neal, Thelma's brother. "I pray we'll find an opportunity to give her the kind of quality of life she deserves."

kmack@tribune.com

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