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Making the Move

By Susan Gower

Thinking about moving? It's a hard decision at any age, but it can be especially tough to leave a place that has been your home for years, or even decades. When planning a move, attitude is everything. Instead of focusing on what you're giving up, think of positive reasons for making the move. Two years ago, Louise Gosma moved from Pennsylvania to Virginia.

"After nearly 49 years married to the same man, I was widowed and I never had in my life ever lived alone. It was a lonely existence as I am a real 'people person' and sharing a house with only two cats just didn't cut it. The outlook for meeting someone where I lived was minimal. My daughters were both talking to me about moving closer before advancing age would take its toll and moving would be a problem. I seriously thought of moving near the closest one - to Annapolis, Maryland - but after looking around for housing there I realized to live in a manner to which I was accustomed would be out of my price range.

So I considered Virginia Beach, Virginia, which ironically had been close to an area where I had begun my married life - Norfolk. This would be an enormous step for me, even though I had moved around some in my married life, from Norfolk, Virginia, to Nazareth, Pennsylvania (my home town), to Springfield, Massachusetts, back to Nazareth and finally to the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area, where I had been transferred in my job."

She knew that moving so far would be difficult. "It would be hard leaving an area where I had many close friends, a good church connection where I even worked part time, and lots of activities I was involved in. But I decided it was now or never."

Moving can cause enormous anxiety about where to move, how to move, what to do with personal possessions, financial concerns and the emotional fallout of moving from the known to the unknown. According to researchers at the Stanford Research Institute, there are many psychological factors that affect moving decisions.

How introverted or extroverted are you? Ask yourself how much social activity do you want or need? How flexible are you? Do you resist change? For many people, independence is a big issue. Do you want to be on your own or do you want and need a solid network of support?

Only you can answer these questions, but once you have committed to the move, start making decisions. If the "to do" list looks daunting, start by breaking it down into manageable steps and don't hesitate to ask for help from family, friends and professionals.

This is also the time to take a hard look at your finances and decide how much you can afford to spend on housing. You should start looking for your next home before selling the one you are in now. Consider the location of your new home. Will you be moving to a new city or state? Close to your children or back to your hometown? Moving even a short distance might mean changing doctors, banks, and shopping routines.

If you are thinking about moving to a senior community, do some research. Minnesota alone has over 1,600 senior housing communities. There are options to suit every type of lifestyle. What activities do you enjoy? What services do you need to do you anticipate needing in the future? Once you have narrowed the choices down, visit your new community, not once, but several times, if possible. If you rent, make sure you have a place to move to before you give notice at your current place. Then give notice according to the provisions set forth in your lease. If you own your present home, once you have decided where you want to go, start preparing to sell. Look for a real estate agent who is knowledgeable and experienced. You should be comfortable with your agent, able to communicate and ask questions. According to a 2003 "Home Buyer/Seller Profile" conducted by the Minnesota Association of Realtors, home buyers are looking for an agent who will provide guidance, who can help them make the right decisions and someone they can trust. It is good to get referrals, but the best agent may not necessarily be your neighbor, or the relative of a friend.

Nancy Scott, Knowledge Services Director for the Minneapolis Area Association of Realtors, recommends seeking an agent who is a Certified Senior Advisor. These are agents who have completed a 30-hour training program to help them serve the needs of clients over the age of 55.

Certified Senior Advisors take courses in estate and financial planning. They study the different types of senior housing and the national senior housing trends. They learn about generational differences and resources available to seniors. Agents are trained to recognize issues and create resource teams to guide their clients step by step through the process.

Currently there are about 8,100 agents with Senior Real Estate Specialist certification nationwide.

Even if you are in good hands, moving is all about change. Just dealing with the "stuff" we all accumulate, such as furniture, dishes, knick-knacks, photos, family treasures, lawn and garden equipment, is enough to keep anybody awake at night. What do you do with all the stuff?

Jean Greener, of Presbyterian Homes understands that it's hard to know where to begin. She has a wealth of practical experience helping seniors who are preparing to scale down their housing. "You spend the first half of your life acquiring stuff and the later half getting rid of it," explains Greener. "Take a look

at the two or three rooms you spend the most time in. Most of us do spend our time in two or three rooms. What do you care most about? Whatever you care most about should be there. If it's not, move the stuff you use daily or weekly into those two or three rooms. Move the other stuff out."

Work on getting better organized and using your space more efficiently. Spend 10 minutes or a half an hour a day sorting. Get the clothes you wear the most into the most convenient closet. Have a room where you can put things you don't want. Then take several brown grocery bags and a marker. Label the bags, 'give away', and 'sale.' You can even put a question mark on a bag for items you are not sure about. For larger objects, buy tape in colors. Red means you are getting rid of it, green means it goes to the new house, etc. Especially be sure to mark things you want to keep forever. Don't focus on what to get rid of. Focus on what means the most to you; what you use the most.

Louise Gosma decided a condo was right for her. She put her money down on a unit, which would be ready within a year. Then she began preparing for the move. "Early in 2002, I began taking stock of everything I had accumulated in 52 years- household goods, an attic full of memorabilia, a garage full of tools and all kinds of yard equipment. I started organizing everything. I put ads in the paper to get rid of the big stuff. I donated my huge computer desk to the pastor of my church. Then I began getting every other disposable item ready for a big yard sale." Bill Lehman is co-owner of Gentle Transitions, an Edina based company that plans, coordinates and supervises every aspect of a move (www.gentletransitions.com). "Our mission is to ease the relocation process for seniors and to provide them with peace of mind during an otherwise traumatic time."

Often, clients are leaving homes they have lived in for thirty or forty years and are overwhelmed by the thought of moving. Lehman explains, "We plan and help them execute everything. They can see that this is do-able after all. We help people decide what they want to take - what is most important and what will fit." "We physically help them sort, using color-coded stickers. We also help them deal with the rest of it. We can make arrangements for sales, make shipping arrangements for items, which are going to family members and take items, which are being donated to charities." "The heart of our business is doing the physical packing, which is usually done the day before the move. Our objective is to create the least amount of disruption and confusion. We try to do it in about 3-5 hours. We also make sure they spend last evening in the home comfortably. The next day, we accompany them to new place. The same crew unpacks. Within 3-5 hours, whole house is set up. There are many little touches that go into the unpacking. We will even take pictures of rooms in the old house before packing, so that we can make the new house look like home."

Before the Gentle Transitions team leaves, clients are securely and comfortably settled. The kitchen is set up, clothes are hung in the closets, pictures are hung,

lamps are plugged in and remotes are programmed. "We have a wonderful crew. We all enjoy the clientele and the satisfaction of helping."

Everyone agrees, planning is the key to a successful move. As Bill Lehman says, "planning ahead in making the move gives you time to make good decisions and good choices." Whether you are using plenty of professional help or none, there are resources available that can help. Websites such as American Moving and Storage Association (www.moving.org) have handy checklists of what needs to be done any time from months in advance right down to moving day. Even if you are not doing the work, lists - both your own and those of professionals, can keep everyone organized and on schedule.

So how did Gosma's move work out for her? She moved into her new home on June 1. "But around the end of July it suddenly hit me one morning - what am I doing? What possessed me to leave longtime friends, a comfortable existence, things that were familiar, for being here totally alone most days." She approached the problem with characteristic energy. She got involved in her church, joined groups, took a part time job and before long, she met a widower on her bowling league.

"And that was the beginning of a new life for me. Jim and I met several times a month and I had him over for dinner and when he asked if he could kiss the cook, I think we both knew there was definitely something going on! After about a year and a half, Jim and I were married and we are very happy sharing our lives. He moved into my condo and is selling his place. Both of us feel that our meeting was meant to be. And for the first time in my life I live near one of my children. That's a definite plus."

Now that's a good move.

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