

Husband-wife firm makes downsizing moves more gentle

An Edina company helps ease the physical and emotional difficulties of moving to smaller quarters.

Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune

When a senior citizen moves, it almost always involves downsizing. And that generally means a painful series of decisions on what has to be thrown away, said Diane Bjorkman, co-owner of a thriving Edina company that specializes in coordinating all aspects of a senior's household move.

The key is, "we never judge another person's attachments, whether it's an ugly coffee mug, a stuffed muskie or an old roasting pan," Bjorkman said. "We try to find room for it."

Which helps explain why one recent client, for whom a well-stocked larder provides a crucial sense of security, now uses a freezer chest for a coffee table in the living room of her very small apartment.

Bjorkman, 48, and her husband, Bill Lehman, 56, run a company called Gentle Transitions, one of a handful of operations nationwide that focus on helping seniors move.

Gentle Transitions owns no trucks and employs no movers. But its 50 part-time employees (Bjorkman and Lehman are the only full-time staff) can do everything else: advising on sorting and purging, determining what fits in the new residence, packing,

scheduling the moving van and unpacking at the end.

"We'll even make the beds and hang the pictures," Bjorkman said. They'll also handle change-of-address and utility notifications, arrange estate sales when necessary or locate charities or relatives who can use excess belongings.

Perhaps most important, for clients with memory problems, the company's moving coordinators seek to replicate the previous residence as much as possible. For example: For a recent 85-year-old client, the china in her hutch went back precisely the same way it was before the move. Ditto for the hanging of her pictures and the positioning of her furniture.

Lehman said the cost, depending on the size of the move and the number of services desired, ranges from \$500 to \$4,500 -- not counting the cost of the mover -- and typically runs from \$1,200 to \$2,500.

The service has earned plaudits from those involved with senior issues.

"I don't know anyone in the industry who doesn't love Gentle Transitions," said Cynthia Frances, marketing director for the Ebenezer Minneapolis Campus, a senior housing development. "They're

wonderful people who delicately and gently handle all those personal treasures.

"I've never, ever heard of an unhappy customer," Frances added, a fact that Bjorkman said "makes this the most stress-free job I've ever had."

Marilou Moringiella, marketing director of the Wellington Senior Community in Highland Park, seconds the notion: "There's a heart to their work," she said. "Moving can be a traumatic life change for seniors, but [Gentle Transitions helps] calm those fears."

In this fashion, Gentle Transitions has grown in double-digit leaps in recent years. But Bjorkman and Lehman, who managed the company for 14 months before buying it two years ago, decline substantial credit for the success.

The late Mercedes Gunderson, who founded the company in 1990, "was the pioneer," Bjorkman said. "She provided the model for the others in the business ... most of which were started in the past five to 10 years. "Her system was so thorough and on-target, there hasn't been much need for us to make many changes."

Except, that is, for the growth rate: After revenue gains that averaged 7 percent in the three years following Gunderson's death in 2000, sales jumped 26 percent in 2004, to a record \$485,000, and 13 percent last year, to another record, estimated at \$550,000.

Part of the reason is Bjorkman's energetic marketing. She organizes 30 to 40 seminars a year for senior groups and makes hundreds of contacts with marketing directors of senior developments. Nonetheless, much of the business is generated by word-of-mouth referral, she said.

Bjorkman, with nearly 20 years of experience in management of senior programs and housing centers, is the face and voice of the company; Lehman, a trader on the Chicago Board Options Exchange for 19 years before the loss of hearing in one ear forced him to retire, handles the business side, including scheduling, hiring, training and bookkeeping.

After moving from Chicago to the Twin Cities, where both had lived before, they heard through a mutual friend that Gunderson's family was looking for someone to run the company. They fell in love with the concept and bought the company early in 2004.

Dick Youngblood • 612-673-4439 • yblood@startribune.com

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