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Help's available for the late-life downsize: paring possessions and relocating
By Associated Press, Published: December 6, 2011 Leanne Italie

Carol Gilbert remembers well the heartache and hassle of watching her aging parents struggle to remain in their house of 45 years; the desperate, last-minute calls for help and her dad's isolation as her mom's health declined.

She also remembers the frustration of going through their things once they finally agreed to relocate to a senior care facility nearby in San Mateo, Calif.

"I must have gone up to the house every Saturday for a year helping them sort through their stuff," Gilbert said. "I couldn't get my mother to make decisions or really do much each visit."

Once settled in the smaller space, surrounded by peers, her father's burden lifted. He got his wish to remain with his wife and began enjoying life again at 86.

Gilbert is now 72 herself and her folks are long dead, but their rocky transition in 1992 motivated her and her husband, David, to consider retirement housing at a much earlier stage. She was only 64 and he 67 when they moved into a full-amenity complex in Palo Alto, Calif., about 20 miles from the rural, ranch-style home where they had spent 35 years and raised their daughter.

There's a chef, a pool, a fitness center, a TV lounge with surround sound and a music room with a grand piano. There's a housekeeping service, a balcony for a small garden and entertainment at least once a month.

"I've never looked back," Gilbert said. "At that time we were the kids here. We certainly weren't candidates for God's waiting room."

As Americans live longer, many people find themselves navigating a confusing web of interconnected services for themselves or their parents when it comes time to shed possessions and relocate. Some, like the Gilberts, use hard-won lessons from their parents' experience to take control of their own late-life downsize while they still have time to enjoy it.

Others have created a new industry, becoming "senior specialists" to help make those transitions less troublesome.

Such specialists span business worlds, from real estate and financial planning to moving, home staging, personal organizing and "late-life coaching." Roughly 25,000 have sought training and education to focus on senior logistics, said Nan Hayes, a senior relocation specialist in suburban Chicago who is also a trainer.

In addition to logistics, they provide emotional breathing room between grown children and aging parents, Hayes said.

“If your parents feel comfortable with the process, if they feel they have some control over it, things will run much more smoothly,” she said. “If you have to argue to make your point or force your opinions and decisions on your parents, you will find yourself up against a roadblock. No one will feel good. Moving mom and dad doesn’t have to be a nightmare.”

In Cincinnati, John Buckles went through a troubling transition with his parents. Determined to enjoy their retirement and hold on to their house, they were forced by ill health into a senior care facility instead, leaving him to sort through decades of their possessions.

“I had no clue what they owned,” he said. “I remember being pissed off because there were thousands of books. I must have gotten rid of 2,000 before I realized there was stuff inside of them, like a little story my mother wrote about me, and money.”

The experience prompted him to co-found Caring Transitions. With about 130 franchises around the country, the company provides “general contractors” who do what faraway relatives often can’t: make sure that moving companies, real estate agents, liquidators, charities, disposal companies, appraisers, cleaners and home stagers are working together with the older person’s best interest in mind.

Buckles and Hayes encourage a “sooner-rather-than-later” approach to sifting through possessions, whether the person is moving or looking to “age in place” through home modifications such as handrails and stair lifts. That approach to late-life housing doesn’t negate the value of a good home clean-out, they said.

“If you want to remain independent longer, you must start making the decisions and acting now to preserve that independence,” said Hayes, who launched a network, MoveSeniors.com, that works with organizations around the country to provide reliable specialists and advice.

“I’ve witnessed too many situations where adult children are forced to make tough decisions about mom’s home and possessions because she kept putting it off,” she said.

The emotional toll on an older person can be heavy, bringing on anxiety, depression, sleeplessness and short-term memory loss, said Hayes and Tracy Greene Mintz, a social worker in Redondo Beach, Calif., who specializes in a body of symptoms known as “relocation stress syndrome.”

“It’s a train, and everybody gets on the moving-mom-and-dad train, and it’s easy to focus on the logistical details because they don’t require you to address the emotional aspects of the move,” Mintz said. “Then mom and dad get to their place and they just shut down.”

There’s a lot that families can do to de-stress a late-life downsize:

SLOW IT DOWN: Sometimes, Buckles said, resistance to shedding that grandfather clock or box of old aprons is driven by the owner's desire to tell the stories behind them. "Once that's done, once somebody took the time to listen, they can give it up," he said.

GIFTING POSSESSIONS: Planning to pass down something once you're gone? Don't wait. "I've comforted hundreds of clients who have had to watch their possessions being donated, sold or tossed in a Dumpster," Hayes said. "Take the time to decide what you really need or love, and take steps to get rid of everything else NOW."

FALSE SPIN: Nobody wants to be the emotional downer, and that can lead to stiff, empty attempts to stay positive when everybody's hurting, Mintz said. "Ask mom or dad, 'Does any of this make you feel anxious? Does any of this make you feel a little bit sad?'" That tiny nudge goes miles toward a better outcome in the new place," she said.

HOME STAGING: Mom has always stored the silverware in the top drawer to the right of the fridge. Make sure that happens in her new home. Bring along her favorite beat-up ottoman that you wanted to toss, and have her new place set up with pictures on the wall and slippers bedside when she moves in.

SPOUSES: Jo Magnum in Raleigh, N.C., twice downsized her parents with the help of her three siblings. They made a pact: no spouses involved. "They weren't allowed in on the conversations over who took what, where our parents went, who took care of the money. They weren't even allowed in the room," she said. "We just didn't need them there."

DOWNSIZE THE DOWNSIZE: Organizer Vickie Dellaquila in Pittsburgh wrote a book, "Don't Toss My Memories in the Trash: A Step-by-Step Guide to Helping Seniors Downsize, Organize and Move." Her advice? Don't give up everything in a set if it means that much. Save six rather than all 12 place settings of the good china or silverware. The same goes for treasured books.

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