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For senior movers, lifting boxes easier than lifting spirits

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By Caitlin Coakley

Moving, a pain for people of any age, can turn terrifying for seniors.

It may be the first time they've moved without a spouse, or the first time they weren't able to lift boxes, or the first time they've gone from a larger to a smaller home.

"They just get paralyzed at this process," said Adele Mahan, founder of Fresh Start Transitions, known as a senior move management company, that is, one offering aid to older adults in the process of a move. Fresh Start Transitions operates in Union County, Charlotte and Matthews.

Senior move managers like Mahan recognize the emotional and physical difficulty for their clients to shift from one place to another. When it comes to moving, their clients need more than just someone to do the heavy lifting. Patience, understanding and compassion go a long way.

"There's a tremendous emotional component to this," said Cindy Greer, who co-founded Transition With Care, which serves the Charlotte area. Many of her clients, she added, are struggling with depression and isolation as well as physical ailments. They may be making the decision to move after losing a spouse, and are dealing with grief in addition to the stress of the move.

Even those who are healthy and aware may think sorting through 20 to 30 years of accumulated stuff is an impossible task, said Tina Braun, founder of Smooth Transitions of Charlotte.

"They packed away a lot of things throughout the home, and normally they don't have a clue where to start," Braun said. "They start in one drawer, and they get so overwhelmed just dealing with that little section, they'll throw their hands up and say 'I'll deal with that tomorrow,' and that goes on for months and months."

For Patricia Fischer, 72, who this week moved out of her four-bedroom Charlotte house into the Matthews retirement community Plantation Estates, calling the senior movers came after she realized the enormous task ahead of her.

Fischer said her recent foot surgery and chronic back problems convinced her she can't take care of the house anymore.

"It's just time for me to go somewhere where someone else takes care of all those responsibilities," she said.

She called Fresh Start Transitions on the recommendation of a friend. "It's just a little too much for me," she said.

What to take, what to leave

The most difficult part for most seniors, say move managers, is deciding what to take from the old home to their new place, usually a small apartment within a retirement community.

“The first thing that I do is spend time with the older adult to get to know them and what’s important to them,” said Jo Kearns, founder of Smart Choices Senior Transitions. “For example, in the living room, what five things do they cherish the most? You have to move the things that are most important.”

To help plan the move and get a feel for how many belongings the client may take, senior movers use a floor plan — either generated using computer software or just a magnetic tray — of the new place to gauge the amount of space and map out where everything will go.

“It’s almost like a grieving process,” Greer said, “leaving things you’ve lived with so long.”

Some seniors are less willing to part with their belongings than others. It can be tricky, Mahan said, to persuade them to give up some of their things while still allowing them to feel like they’re not being ordered around.

“The No. 1 with all seniors is they need control,” Mahan said. “They’ve lost control with everything in their life, so we have to give them back that control. You have to be very patient.”

One way that senior movers can help their clients adjust is to find appropriate charities for the items they can’t keep or give away to family. Other items, like furniture, are appraised and often sold at an auction.

“One of our obligations is to try and make as much money as possible for the seniors,” Kearns said. The movers frequently are able to help their clients recoup the cost of the service, usually between \$2,500 to \$4,000 for a move to a one-bedroom apartment, according to NASMM.

Whatever arrangements are made for the seniors’ things — donated, auctioned, or given to family — Mahan said she never suggests that any of it is being thrown away.

“They don’t want to throw their stuff away,” Mahan said. “They want to find someone who wants it. It’s very emotional.”

Waking up to the change

At the new place, the movers unpack everything and set up the home to be as similar as possible to the old one.

“You want them to wake up and see that everything on the dresser the way it always was in the old place, for them to go into the bathroom and have everything the same,” Braun said. “There’s going to be a lot of different things, but having as much familiarity as possible, especially the older they are, it helps them making that transition.”

Greer said the process can be emotional for the movers themselves, but also rewarding.

“We see people from point A, in tears because they’re so alone, to when we get them re-settled into their new home,” she said. “When they get to their new home, it’s all done, and they can start enjoying life again. And they do.”

A booming industry awaits the boomers

Membership for the National Association of Senior Move Managers (NASMM) has increased tremendously since the group’s founding in 2003. In 2006, there were 60 members; now, there are more than 500, including senior-moving businesses in Canada.

It makes sense, said Jennifer Pickett, associate executive director for NASMM. The oldest of the nation’s baby boomers are approaching their mid-60s, and in 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau said 9 percent of the population was older than 70. According to NASMM data, that demographic has an estimated \$8 trillion of spending power.

“They’re quickly becoming the largest and wealthiest demographic,” Pickett said. “It just makes sense.”

Previous generations may have relied on their children to offer care when they aged, including moving assistance when it was needed. Now, Pickett said, seniors’ adult children don’t always live in the same town and can’t afford to take the time to fly out to help their parents move.

Local move managers say that their decision to get into the industry had more to do with a desire to help than a conscious analysis of supply and demand. Many of them have a background in the moving business and most of them have worked with seniors.

Before founding Smart Choices Senior Transitions, which serves Cabarrus and Rowan counties, Jo Kearns worked as a project manager for a moving company and had neighbors who were senior citizens. Watching them, she began to think about how difficult it would be for them to move.

“I got online and discovered that there was a whole industry developing around seniors and their needs for relocation,” Kearns said. “I thought, that’s a perfect fit for me.”

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