

About Business, Spring 2004

Gentle Transitions Assists Moving Seniors

By Brett Carlson

Edina resident Mercedes Gunderson experienced first-hand with her own aging mother the unique challenges seniors face when moving: downsizing, leaving a home after many years and confronting diminished physical and mental abilities.

Mercedes had moved her own mother no less than four times in her later years, so she understood the emotional and physical strain that a move can entail. In 1990, Mercedes decided it was time to design a business to help ease this difficult transition for seniors. Combining the skills of logistics experts with the tact of professional counselors, Mercedes and her husband, Bernie, founded a company called Gentle Transitions.

A visionary and pioneer in the industry, Mercedes originated the idea of a senior moving service. When Gentle Transitions opened in 1990, it was one of the first such businesses in the country.

Gentle Transitions coordinates all aspects of a senior's move. Their services include planning, packing, closure arrangements, unpacking and resettling into a new home. A main component of the process is downsizing. Gentle Transitions decides what seniors can realistically take into their new home and what needs to be sold or given away. Part of this process includes communicating with area charities to determine what can and cannot be accepted.

Each move is monitored by a moving facilitator who oversees the entire operation. Depending on the size of the move, the moving facilitator assembles a team of one to five people. They photograph how the client has their personal spaces arranged, including kitchen, vanity and china cabinets. Within four to six hours, they pack the whole house. The next day, they complete the unpacking in a four-hour period and replicate those personal spaces in the new residence.

"The most exciting part of the whole experience is adding the finishing touches," said current co-owner Diane Bjorkman. These finishing touches include such things as making the beds, getting the spice cabinet set up, changing light bulbs, hanging clothes, placing plates in the cupboard and hanging pictures on the wall. Bjorkman elaborated by saying, "Many times, our clients are literally in tears. They are amazed that something so difficult can happen so simply."



Husband and wife team Diane Bjorkman and Bill Lehman recently purchased Gentle Transitions in Edina.

Bernie Gunderson echoed those comments. "At the end of the day, I feel like I've truly made a difference in a person's life," he said.

Gentle Transitions employs approximately 35 part-time workers. Gunderson described the staff by saying, "Each and every one of our part-time employees are exceptional individuals. They care deeply about our

clients and do a lot of handholding, paying great attention to every detail that will make a difference in the client's adjustment to their new home." Many of these employees are retired professionals who are seeking rewarding part-time employment. According to Bjorkman, "The employees really enjoy the job. It is a satisfying experience in that they get to see a happy client."

Gentle Transitions recently underwent a change in ownership. Mercedes died in June 2001. After her death, Bernie and his son Greg continued to manage the business from a distance. In the fall of 2002, Bernie's son, Greg, who operates a Gentle Transitions in California, met with Edina residents and husband and wife team Diane Bjorkman and Bill Lehman. Greg was looking for someone in the Twin Cities area to take over the business.

Not only did they have a combined 24 years experience working with seniors, but, according to Bernie, "It was immediately evident that Diane and Bill had the same objectives that Mercedes [held]. Our morals and values go hand in hand."

Everything that Mercedes implemented is still in place today. Bernie continues to have a strong affiliation with the business. At a recent project in Stillwater, Lehman described him as "the first one to the job site and the last one to leave." At 79, Bernie continues to assist with moves, but still finds ample time for his love of tennis.

Gentle Transitions serves more than 150 senior communities in the metro area. Gentle Transitions is located at 7001 Cahill Road, Edina. For more information, contact Diane Bjorkman, 952-944-1028 or visit the company's website at www.gentletransitions.com.

Reprint courtesy of About Business