

BOXING UP A LIFETIME

Gentle Transitions arranges the move when seniors have to leave their homes.

Mike Hughlett, Pioneer Press

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Moving is a strain for just about anyone. Your meticulously arranged furniture is unceremoniously carted into a musty van. Fragile keepsakes are yanked from their moorings and stuffed into cardboard boxes. Order can quickly slip into chaos.

Now, multiply a high anxiety level several times and you'll find yourself in the position of senior citizens, moving -- often grudgingly -- from houses they've occupied for decades into assisted or independent living centers. Possessions that filled a 2,000-square-foot house have to be squeezed into a one-bedroom apartment. Places that shaped a life -- a child's old bedroom, a back yard that hosted many a family barbecue -- have to be left behind.

"It's a very stressful time for most of our clients to go through," said Bill Lehman, operations director for Gentle Transitions in Edina.

Founded in 1990, Gentle Transitions was perhaps the first Twin Cities specialist in moving older people. And it was among the first wave of such companies nationally. The

industry has grown in recent years -- it even started its own trade association -- as more entrepreneurs see opportunity in the growing market for senior services.

The costs of Gentle Transitions' services vary, but an average move might cost about \$2,000.

The company doesn't physically move a senior citizen's belongings. It arranges a moving company to do that. In fact, it arranges the entire move.

First, one of Gentle Transitions' five "facilitators" takes out a tape measure and sizes up how much stuff in a senior's current home will fit in the new home.

"The most important first step is deciding what's going to go with you," Lehman said.

Gentle Transitions packs what gets moved, using a legion of part-timers, many of whom -- like the facilitators -- are retirees themselves. It also arranges for the disposal of what doesn't get moved, lining up charitable donations, arranging estate sales and even bringing in a Dumpster if needed.

The company then unpacks and rearranges all that does get moved, aiming to have a new home fully

functional from the moment the resident walks in.

"We try to make the whole place comfortable, and familiar from where they are coming from," Lehman said.

That's particularly important because some of Gentle Transitions' clients don't want to move. Some are essentially forced to do so by declining health or the vicissitudes of age -- Alzheimer's disease, infirmities that restrict mobility, and so on.

In fact, just recently a customer landed in the hospital not long after moving, overwhelmed by the stress. "Frankly, I think the whole thing was too much for her," Lehman said. "It was the mental exhaustion. She really didn't want to move."

The woman who founded Gentle Transitions, Mercedes Gunderson, knew what her clients would be facing. The late Gunderson started the business in 1990 after moving her own mother from Wisconsin to the Twin Cities. Her son Greg set up a Los Angeles branch of Gentle Transitions in 1994.

Mercedes Gunderson died of cancer at age 65 three years ago. After her death, her husband, Bernie, brought in Lehman and his wife, Diane Bjorkman, to manage the company. They came with the

understanding that they would likely buy Gentle Transitions' Twin Cities operation, which they did on Jan 1. (Greg Gunderson still owns the California business.)

Bjorkman's career is steeped in senior care. She worked for several years at Presbyterian Homes in Arden Hills and then managed an apartment complex for independent seniors in Roseville. Her next stop was in her home state of Illinois, where she

developed and partly owned a 48-bed home for Alzheimer's patients in suburban Chicago.

Lehman, on the other hand, spent almost 20 years working at the Chicago Board of Trade. "I was one of those guys who screams and yells," he said referring to his job as a stock options trader. He had to quit because a hearing ailment made it hard for him to follow the action.

In 1999, Lehman and Bjorkman moved back to the Twin Cities, where both

have longstanding ties. Financially secure from their past work, they fished around for a business to run and own. They found out about Gentle Transitions through a former associate of Bjorkman's.

Now, Lehman handles most of the company's day-to-day operations, while Bjorkman does much of the marketing. And much of that marketing is done through close associations with assisted living and independent living centers. Both are vital in passing along referrals about moving services.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Company: **Gentle Transitions**

Business: Coordinating moves of senior citizens, usually from houses to independent or assisted living centers.

Location: Edina

Contact: 952-944-1028; www.gentletransitions.com

Owners: Diane Bjorkman and Bill Lehman

Annual revenue: About \$400,000 expected this year

Employees: Five regular part-timers, who coordinate moves; about 30 more part-timers, who help pack.

Competition: Four small local companies

Challenge ahead: Getting the word out that a specialized moving service for seniors exists.

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2 PHOTOS: CRAIG BORCK, PIONEER PRESS

1) Edina-based Gentle Transitions helps Eloise Pederson move into an apartment at Devenwood in Bloomington. Bill Lehman, one of two owners of Gentle Transitions, chats with Pederson as they wait for the movers to arrive at her new residence.

2) Bob Fisher, left, from Fisher Transfer Co. takes belongings into Pederson's new apartment while Gentle Transitions facilitator Janet Parrants decides where a rack should go. Co-owner Bill Lehman watches in the background.