

Moving company helps seniors transition gently

By Erica Hartmann

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After 47 years in her house on Boland Avenue in St. Paul, Therese Heck was ready to move. The house's hallways were quiet, its stairs laborious and its maintenance expensive. She was certain she would miss nothing but lively conversation with a kind-hearted neighbor.

But Heck had reservations — big ones. Friends had warned her that moving was stressful, and she wondered if she could do it alone. With her closets full of clutter and her family thousands of miles away, the task seemed staggering.

That's when she found Gentle Transitions, an Edina-based company that helps seniors pack and unpack a lifetime of possessions when they decide to move.

With the help of Gentle Transitions, Heck was able to tackle her move into Highlands on Graham in St. Paul and leave behind the hassles of home ownership.

"They provide just what they say," Heck said, "a gentle transition."

Since 1990, Gentle Transitions has helped nearly 2,000 seniors take one of the biggest steps of their lives — leaving their home and moving into a senior community.

Founded by Mercedes Gunderson, a long-time member of Our Lady of Grace in Edina, Gentle Transitions strives to accommodate the unique emotional and physical needs of seniors as they move.

Gunderson developed the business after moving her own mother to St. Therese Southwest, a retirement community in Hopkins.

By helping seniors sort possessions, hire movers, plan sales, and orchestrate other mundane details, Gunderson hoped to make moving a stress-free experience for seniors and their families.

"There are so many pieces to pull together that it becomes very overwhelming for seniors," said Diane Bjorkman, who took over Gentle Transitions with her husband, Bill Lehman, after Gunderson's death in 2001, "but we are experts at the art of moving — and it is an art."

Armed with experience and compassion, Bjorkman, Lehman and their staff of 35 part-time employees orchestrate every stage of a senior's move.

After an initial, no-obligation consultation, the client is assigned a moving facilitator to oversee every detail of the moving process.

Several days before the move, the moving facilitator will visit the client's residence and help him or her sort through their possessions.

Using a three-color labeling system, the moving facilitator and the client mark each item in the home for packing, give-away or disposal.

The moving facilitator also measures the client's new residence and helps him or her decide how to arrange furniture and appliances.

The day before the move, the moving facilitator returns with a packing team to pack the senior's belongings and get the furniture ready to move.

At this time, the Gentle Transitions team takes pictures of the client's rooms, closets and cupboards so that their arrangements can be replicated in the client's new residence.

On the day of the move, the moving facilitator and the packing team arrive before the movers, travel with the senior to their new residence once the moving van has been packed, and stay to unpack the client's belongings after the movers leave.

Before the team departs, lamps are plugged in, remotes are programmed, computers are hooked up and pictures are hung. Clothes are hung in the closets, beds are made, and the client's food is restocked in the refrigerator and cupboards.

"They put things right back where they found them, right down to towels on the rack and toilet paper on the toilet paper holder," said Jo Nammacher, a resident of Cornelia Place in Edina who has moved with Gentle Transitions twice. "It just feels so good that they are doing everything so perfectly."

Therese Heck agreed.

"I think I would have been crazy if I'd had someone who didn't know what they were doing," Heck said. "But they work just like clockwork. I've never seen anything so organized in my life."

Heck, who made her move nearly a month ago, said working with Gentle Transitions allowed her to enjoy her arrival in a new community rather than worry about her departure from home.

"I didn't even realize how much they'd done until after they left," Heck said. Dee Chance, the marketing director at St. Therese Southwest, said Gentle Transitions' services are invaluable.

"It is less stressful for the new resident with the expertise of the moving team and their caring, respectful manner," Chance said. "Any housing change can be a challenge and Gentle Transitions assists the new resident to start off on the right foot."

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