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Downsizing Help Is on the Way

By **ROBERT STRAUSS**

CHERRY HILL, N.J.

JUDY FRANKEN opened a cabinet in her den, showing off rows of neatly packed photo albums.

“We’ve been all around the world and, of course, have grandchildren, so this is my way of keeping that alive,” she said. Then she walked across the room and swung open the doors to a wall of cabinets. Crammed on the shelves were dozens of boxes of slides.

“Who looks at them anymore?” she sighed. “We’re just not going to be able to take all these to the next place.”

Like many still-able folks of the pre-baby-boom era, Judy and Richard Franken, 75 and 79 respectively, were downsizing. The couple were moving from their townhouse in this Philadelphia suburb to a condominium in a retirement community nearby. They had moved before, but to places the same size or bigger. This time, the new place would be half the size of the old one, and Mrs. Franken knew she was going to need help.

“A lot of moving is psychological, and I knew this one would be tough for us,” she said. “We’d kill each other — or just not get it done.”

So she sought the services of a relatively new profession, the “senior move manager.” The job is part traditional mover, part trash-versus-treasure detector and part psychological counselor for those planning what might be their final move.

It is a business that probably wouldn’t have existed a generation ago, said Peg Guild, who owns Assisted Moving, in Raleigh, N.C., and is president of the 200-member National Association of Senior Move Managers.

“Our parents’ parents didn’t move to a retirement community,” said Mrs. Guild, who is 52. “If they did downsize, it was right after the kids moved out and they were in their 50s, so if they were giving away the dining room set, the kids in their 20s and 30s were delighted to have it.”

Now, she said, the adult children don’t need things from their parents.

Patty Perkins of Byron Homes was helping Mr. Franken sift through the papers and random newspaper clippings that he had saved in his office for 20 years.

She persuaded him to throw out lots of old papers without sentimental value. Things became more problematic with his collection of hats. After an hour of soul-searching, the 15 hats were whittled down to 4.

“I know if I had done this with him, we’d still have 15 hats,” his wife said. Donna Willman, the president of Byron Homes, said that retirees had a different view of downsizing than younger people.

“For older people,” she said, “it is the loss of control. What I find when people hear about our service is that they realize that other people are in the same boat. Once they know they are not alone, they are more apt to take our advice.”

Ms. Willman said she started by getting the floor plans of each house and showing exactly how much of the old furniture the client could fit in the new place. Then she separated things: what was going to the new house, what was going to relatives and what was going to be sold, trashed or donated elsewhere.

Mrs. Guild said it cost \$600 to \$4,000 to pack a customer up for a move. It is all about how much time it takes, she said.

Both Ms. Willman and Mrs. Guild said they sent teams on moving day to make sure all the fragile pieces were packed and the movers put things in the right rooms on the move-in end.

“What was even better than the downsizing was to get to our new place and have it all set up, which is something a mover doesn’t really do,” said Judi Fleming, who moved with her husband, Pepper, from a ranch home in Titusville, N.J., to a two-bedroom condo 10 miles away in Lawrenceville, with the help of Ms. Willman’s company.

“When you are retired, you deserve an easy new start.”