

Professionals help when the goal is downsizing a lifestyle

By Prue Salasky

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Joanne Rein had already decided to downsize. In the summer, the 56-year-old former Marine and English professor, now an instructional designer, put her two-story Portsmouth home on the market. Her negotiations on a local condo stalled; then, at Thanksgiving, she talked to her mother in DeLand, Fla., and her plans changed abruptly.

Her mother, whose husband died in March, revealed that she had been in the hospital for two weeks with a diagnosis of congestive heart failure. In an instant Rein decided to move to Florida to be near her "very independent" mother. She determined that the most economical way to do it would be to reduce all her belongings to whatever would fit in her blue Honda Civic.

Overcome by the enormity of dismantling a household of 11 years, Rein found herself sleepless in the middle of the night and trolling the Internet

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in search of guidance. "I was panicking," she says. She typed "downsizing" into her iPad and came up with the Caring Transitions Web site recently set up by Phillip Sweat. "It was exactly what I needed. They're just taking care of everything for me," says Rein, who closes on the sale of her home on Dec. 15, and plans to get on the road immediately.

Sweat, who has worked in a local warehouse for 32 years, purchased the Caring Transitions franchise for Newport News and extended area, from Deltaville to Smithfield, and Suffolk to Gloucester, in August. He'd been toying with the idea of a business for years. "Every now and then I'd browse the Internet for something that made sense and where I could see a need," he says. Almost 20 years ago, he found himself the executor of his older brother's estate after he died unexpectedly at age 36. "I didn't know what to do. I had no idea," he says. "At a time like that, you don't think right. You need help." And that's where Caring Transitions comes in.

Nationally, the 15-year-old company specializes in senior moving, providing services that include appraisals, auctions, tag sales and help with real estate, banking and legal needs.



ROB OSTERMAIER/DAILY PRESS

Phillip Sweat, the owner of a Caring Transitions franchise, talks with an art expert about an old print. Sweat's company specializes in helping people downsize their lives with estate sales, auctions and more.



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Joanne Rein, left, hired Phillip Sweat, owner of a Caring Transitions franchise, to help her sell the contents of her Portsmouth home so she can move to Florida to be with her mother.

Downsize

Though the bulk of the work is geared to seniors, Sweat can accommodate any sudden or difficult move, such as those resulting from divorce or bankruptcy. The work also brings together his areas of expertise.

His own 1920s home on a rural stretch of road in Newport News is crowded with antiques. His wife, Pamela, has become knowledgeable from years of dabbling in the business. Collections of dishes, napkin dolls, salt and pepper shakers, 1940s "sprinkle bottles" for ironing, and more, stuff the shelves and tops of tables and sideboards. Between them and the Sweats can get a good start on appraisals, and he also calls in additional experts and sends photos of furniture and memorabilia to other franchisees online for their input.

He can use all the business contacts he has in the region. "I know people. I know people who know people," he asserts, noting that his mother still lives in Williamsburg in the house he grew up in. He can do a little or a lot. He can help with appraisals and assessments, and he can help people sell their stuff, either at auction on-site, in an estate sale, or online at various sites, such as estatesales.net, tagsell.it.com or caringtransitions.com.

In downsizing, one of the most common problems involves determining what to keep. Using a computer program, Sweat can determine what furniture will fit in the new surroundings — taking into account the height of windows and ceilings, the position of outlets and the like — and what will need to go.

Rein doesn't yet have a home to go to and is adamant about getting rid of everything. "It's all just stuff," she says, and it's all up for grabs. But, actually, she's set aside some of the valuables and collectibles for her children — Waterford crystal lamps and Madam Alexander dolls — and also a few pieces of living room and dining room furniture requested by them. "I've given them months and it's only now that they want to keep everything," she says, shrugging.

All she's keeping for herself are her clothes and computers, a 32-inch flat-screen TV that her mother has expressed an interest in, and her 12-year-old cat, Mugsy.

She indicates a box that has her children's report cards and some photos. Of course she has to keep these, she says. "Oh, and my music collection," she adds. Sweat interjects that instead of



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As part of helping Rein downsize for her move to Florida, Sweat found someone to continue feeding and caring for a neighborhood cat Rein calls Buddy, which had been declared "unadoptable."

Want stuff?

The last day of the estate tag sale on Sussex Drive in Portsmouth is from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday, Dec.12. To contact Phillip Sweat of Caring Transitions, go to caringtransitions.net/yorktownva; 291-9546.

cramming everything in the car it would be economical and efficient to send her DVD collection by media mail; the same goes for books, he suggests. "See, they're so helpful," says Rein, soaking in the information, and noting that she has some valuable books in her collection that she needs to sort. "How about these flutes?" she asks. "I got one of them from Ireland, actually it's a penny whistle." She indicates an antique table from her childhood and a solid oak dresser that she bought for \$5 when she was 7 years old; she's firm about selling them all.

"I did just throw away my school papers. It broke my heart," she says. But she's keeping the letters from 15 years of her ex-husband's deployments with the Marine Corps from trouble spots around the world, including the bombing of the barracks in Beirut. They're neatly arranged and numbered, providing a historical, as well as sentimental, record.

Sweat takes photos of all the large furniture pieces and the mirrors; he has brought his wife, Pamela, and an art consultant, Lori Glenn, with him to bolster his own evaluations. "He's help-



The remaining items in Rein's Portsmouth home are being sold in an estate sale that ends at 3 p.m. today. She will decide the fate of any remaining items after that time.



Sweat clears a table so it can be photographed and put on his Web site for interested buyers.

ing me to organize. I see progress," says Rein. "It's letting me move forward with other things, like dealing with the painters," she says.

Already, several of her items are displayed on a variety of estate sale Web sites. The day before the tag sale, Sweat will return and price everything. "It's all on a percentage basis. I want a fair price, I don't want to give it away," says Rein. When the sale is over, she and Sweat will decide what to do with anything that's left; either giving it away, or storing it and selling it on consignment. Either way, Sweat will empty the house before the new owners move in after the Wednesday closing.

He covers every detail, even asking if Rein has thought where she'll sleep if he sells the bed.

She indicates a My Little Pony sleeping bag from her daughter's sleepover days that's sitting on top of a box of clothes. "I'm a Marine. I'm tough," she says.

Sweat cautions that it's an emotional time and suggests that Rein leave the house during the sale. "It's hard to see your things going out the door," he advises. Rein hesitates and says she'll think about it.

That just leaves Buddy, a beautiful Blue Point Himalayan cat with a mass of fur, who Rein has fed outside for 11 years. He won't use a litter box and the animal shelter told her he was "unadoptable." Sweat has taken care of the problem, arranging for his neighbor to keep caring for Buddy. Rein tears up as she puts him in the carrier and says goodbye. "This is hard," she says.