

Downsizing: Purging possessions from home to apartment can be liberating

She didn't think she could do it, yet Janis Kilmer swept her hand across the kitchen table and dumped the hefty pile of loose recipes directly into the trash.

"I can start over," said the new resident of Mercy Ridge retirement community who downsized in November from a three-story townhouse in Cockeysville to a two-bedroom apartment in Timonium.

"When you decide to move, there is always a limited amount of time to sort through possessions," said Ms. Kilmer, 73, a member of Towson Presbyterian Church. "And it's best done before you are ill or your children have to do it for you."

The retired nurse who once worked at Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore, had set a goal to do just that - move on her own.

Purging was required.

"I yearned for that liberated feeling from all these things that I was caretaker of," said Ms. Kilmer. "When you have room to keep them, you do, but they have to be dusted, organized and taken care of in some way or another."

Nancy Brown of Custom Moves helps seniors move from a family home into more manageable retirement spaces; she had suggested to Ms. Kilmer the hand-sweeping-the-table method.

"You can pay us to pack it and pay movers to move it and then get rid of it, or you can pitch it now," is her standard pitch to clients. She drops gentle purging hints by asking, "Gosh, where are we going to put that?"

Some have an easier time purging possessions than others, she said, and some people can't face the fact that an item is going to Goodwill.

“There are varying degrees of emotion,” said Ms. Brown about the downsizing process. More than half of her clients have been in their homes for many years.

“It’s emotional to leave someplace you’ve lived in for 40 years. I feel for you, but what you’re doing is giving your children a wonderful gift by moving to someplace safer so they don’t have to worry about you as much.”

Custom Moves suggests even if you are thinking about moving in a few years, start the purging process now – there isn’t always time later.

For instance, sit with a drawer while you’re watching TV and clean it out. And keep in mind adult children don’t always want everything.

One of Ms. Kilmer’s four sons wanted her small collection of antique clocks; another wanted the family’s genealogy information.

But in general, she said, “children do not want the things we treasure.”

For sentimental reasons, she took along a sterling flatware set and some pieces of serving utensils to her new one-level apartment, which has “more than average” storage space and a separate storage area.

“While it was difficult and painful to part with things,” she said, “at least I got to make the decisions.”

Mercy Ridge and Custom Moves offers these suggestions for a successful move:

Before the move

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