

The upside of downsizing

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Robin Abb was a stand-up comedian for a time in California, and she also owned a consignment store in Colorado. Both jobs, as a communicator and as a buyer of vintage clothes and goods, have given her experience in helping people downsize from big homes to apartments or senior-living situations, she says. Photo by Allison Arthur

Robin Abb has made smooth transitions in her personal life – from stand-up comedian in California to handgun control lobbyist in Washington, D.C., to caregiver in Texas to owner of Rocking Robin’s Retro & Resale, a consignment store in Colorado.

And all of those life changes seem to have set her up to be an expert on making transitions in life go smoothly – and with joy.

Abb is the one-woman-show owner of Smooth Transitions—Olympic Peninsula, which is part of a franchise of businesses that help seniors downsize from large homes to apartments or smaller homes or even assisted-living centers.

Abb learned about the franchise when she was thinking of naming her new business Smooth Transitions and decided to look up the name first to see if it was taken.

“Sure enough, it was taken, but it was the same business I wanted to offer and it was a franchise operation,” she said. Abb decided to buy in, get training, be licensed and bonded, and become associated with a larger “family of fellow senior-move managers,” as she calls it.

There are an estimated 80 such franchises and more than 900 senior-move managers in the U.S. and Canada, according to the National Association of Senior Move Managers. In addition to Abb in Port Townsend, Linda Kaahanui with New Season Move Management in Port Ludlow also serves as a senior-move manager.

Abb took time out from a busy day recently to talk about her experience with downsizing.

“Think of me as that competent adult daughter you wish lived nearby,” Abb said jovially while taking a break from posting items for sale on Jefferson County Buy, Sale, Trade, a website that Abb uses to help sell items for customers.

MOVE OUT, MOVE IN,

SELL STUFF

In addition to helping people move from one place to another and set up their new digs, Abb also helps people sell what they don’t want or need anymore. She prices items, sells them on the internet or at estate sales, and also takes valuable items to consign at Wandering Wardrobe, Fancy Feathers and other places. Books go to William James Bookseller in Port Townsend. Unwanted items go to Goodwill.

The goal of selling any items is to make money for her clients.

“And I know how to say no when someone is trying to go down too far,” Abb said of being savvy to those try to finagle a price below what a treasure is really worth.

Abb also helps people navigate the world of estate sales. It’s often hard to stage an estate sale in a home where people still are living in it, which is one reason for selling items on the internet, she said. It’s not easy to distinguish between what is and what isn’t for sale in the home.

If someone wants to hold an estate sale or have people come into their homes to pick up items sold on the internet, Abb is there to interact with the buyers, so the sellers don’t have to do that. It can become difficult for people to part with their possessions, she said.

So what brought Abb to her latest personal transition as a senior-move expert?

Q: What’s your personal experience in downsizing or making transitions?

A: I downsized a lot to move here to start this business. I got rid of all of my furniture, kept the lamps, mirrors and wall art. And once I got here, I had a great time buying “new but used” furniture. It was fun decorating with all new things. But when I move again, I’m not that attached to any of it, so I can let it go again.

Q: But had you had experience other than the move here in downsizing?

A: My real first experience was downsizing my mom. I moved home to Sherman, Texas, to take care of her 21 years ago. I was living an exciting life in Washington, D.C., but it was imperative that someone move home to care for Mom, and I had the best relationship with her.

The first downsizing task was asking her to let me sell her dining room furniture. The table and chairs, china hutch and buffet. I told her the days of formal dinners for Thanksgiving and Christmas were over. And she needed furniture with round corners instead of sharp, so if she fell, she wouldn’t get badly hurt. She agreed to let me sell the dining room furniture, and I replaced it with a round table and cushioned oval chairs.

A couple of weeks later, my sisters held a birthday party for me. My dear friend, Tina, was sitting between my mom and I, and at one point, she just slugged my arm. I looked at her, and she said, “Your mom just told me you sold her dining room furniture so she’d have more room to fall!” True enough!

Q: What gave you the idea to start a business to help people?

A: I had a consignment store in Boulder, Colorado, for 13 years, and had dealt with lots of people looking for homes for mom’s or grandma’s old furs, hats, gloves, jewelry, etc. I had one consignor who was doing this exact business and was thrilled to have my store as a resource for those very kinds of items.

I was getting close to turning 60 and was really done with working retail hours. I was also done with Colorado and snow in April. I desperately wanted to move to the Pacific Northwest. I found Port Townsend by accident and felt it was my calling. I got lucky and sold my store, and moved here a little over a year ago. I launched my business April 1, 2016.

Q: Do you work only with people who are retiring or moving into smaller apartments? If not, who else have you worked with?

A: As a senior-move manager, my training was to work with seniors, but I’ve had a few clients here who are younger. I’ve started with one client doing a clean-out for an apartment that the resident had passed away. The job kept growing into downsizing her home, doing two sales, and I continue to help her on occasion with reorganizing. Another client needed my help because she was in so much pain due to a bad hip and she just couldn’t do any of the physical stuff needed. Others have contacted me for help because they’re on a deadline to move because the house sold faster than they expected.

Q: What’s the first thing people don’t want to give up? How do you help people part with things they don’t want to give up?

A: Their children's artwork from kindergarten. Photos and memorabilia. Oh, it's everything. People are so attached to their stuff. Helping them let go has a lot of different variables. Do they have to get rid of their stuff because they don't have space anymore? Trying to talk them out of getting a storage unit to keep the stuff? I can share stories with them, but mostly I want them to realize that their stuff is a burden, and by letting go, they are opening up space in their life for new experiences. It's liberating.

Q: Have you ever had people who regretted their "transition" to downsize and what was it that they regretted?

A: Most are really grateful and realize after the stuff is gone that they didn't need it.

Ultimately, that is the reason to downsize while you're still capable of making the decisions, making some money off your possessions.

The greatest gift you can give your children is to not leave them with a house that's packed with stuff that could take a year to go through. If they don't live close by, or have full-time careers, or they never had a good relationship with you, they'll likely just to have everything hauled off to the dump rather than take the time to go through everything. Or, they're racked with guilt and the project just sits there. Or, the siblings fight over the stuff. The list goes on.

The fact is, your kids don't want your stuff. They'll gladly take your cash, gold, diamonds, a car, but they don't want your furniture, your clothes, your photo albums, your memories. They also don't want china, silverware and their art projects from the first grade.

Q: We live in a stuff-oriented world, so do you have any tips for people about accumulating stuff?

A: Yes. Stop buying more stuff. Only buy what you need. Start getting rid of what you're not using. Only keep what you're still using or that brings you joy. Start consigning and once you've made some space, say, in your closet, then use some of your credit at the consignment store to buy something new to fill the space.

We, especially women, always want new clothes, but if you get in the habit of “trading” in your clothes through a consignment store, you’ll always have new things, and you’ll find it much easier to let go of clothes that you might have only paid \$15 or \$20 for. And buy local and secondhand whenever you can.

Q: What are the advantages of hiring a senior-move manager?

A: We all come trained, licensed, insured, bonded and adhere to a code of ethics. For example, a recent thread of conversation amongst the members was about finding money in homes they had been asked to clean out. Members spoke of finding thousands of dollars in cash in hiding places, and turning it over to their clients, even though the clients had hired them to just get rid of everything.

Q: What do you enjoy most about your job?

A: The look on their faces when they come into see how I’ve arranged their furniture or found something that they lost and put it out on display. It’s like “Wow.” It warms my heart more than I can tell you. The thing I enjoy most is downsizing and reorganization, and helping people understand they are opening up space for new things to come.

Q: What would you like people to know about transitions that you think they might not know or associate with them?

A: Change is good. Downsizing can open up space for new experiences. We can learn lessons from the millennials about trading stuff in for experiences.

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Terri Quinlan Mar 22, 2017 9:46am

I can tell you from personal experience that Robin is so good at downsizing and motivating at the same time. She does it ALL with a simile, a song or a dance to boot! I couldn't have made my recent move without her! She thinks of everything down to the last detail. She works quickly and efficiently and never makes it uncomfortable for you with the decisions that need to be made. A gem!