

Smith & Joans, the Upside of Downsizing

REPRINT OF AN EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE STORY
BY VICTORIA SCOTT

Stuff.

There is that June when most everything one owns fits in a car, when, with a hand from friends the contents of a college dorm or bedroom can be packed and headed in the direction of life's Next Big Adventure.

It is unlikely that one's belongings will ever fit in so small a space again or assistance be so willing and able. Possessions accrue with the years, collecting memories and dust, defying attempts to whittle them to size. With both trash and treasure looming so large, the prospect of moving to a smaller house or condo or apartment is daunting.

Downsizing can be more drag than adventure. But help is at hand.

This spring a pair of good-humored Evanston sisters launched Smith & Joans Shrinking Homes relying on their demonstrated ability to "make scaling down simple" for their clients.

Mary Lou Smith and Joanie Wilkins say they get a kick out of cleaning out other people's houses. "We've been doing this for years for family," says Ms. Smith, adding, "it's easier than a lumberyard." And now that they have decided to make a business of it, they say their other two sisters "wish they were here" to join in the fun.

The pair assume that most people who contact them will already have purchased a new place and will be dreading the work of sorting through the old. Ms. Smith and Ms. Wilkins promise, "We'll be with you from start to finish." They will help decide what will fit in the client's new place, arrange for an estate sale, make donations of the leftovers and call the haulers to remove everything unwanted. Last, they will hire a cleaning service that will "leave the home 'broom clean' for its new owners," they say.

The sisters have deep roots in Evanston. They grew up here and count their children as the seventh generation to do so. "Because we were born here, we know the context," Ms. Smith says. That context includes their web of connections to retired firemen, trash haulers, estate sale experts and realtors.

The two women have a knack for business – and for reinventing themselves. Back in 1979 or '80, Ms. Smith was "A Touch of Color," a decorator handy with wallpaper and paint. She stepped up to run the Cos Bar, a snack shop in the Cos Building, from 1994 to 1997.

But she is most widely known as the smile behind the morning coffee at the Top of the Tracks cafe. Until she retired last October, she spent 25 years catering to Metra commuters at the Central Street railroad station. Some, half asleep, relied on her memory of just what ratio of coffee to cream and sugar they required to wake up.

Apparently she filled her "idle" moments, too. Several years ago, she says she began doing what she calls the "simple staging" of properties for sale – "getting rid of junk and taking two or three items out of every room" and then "arranging the rooms in an attractive way."

Ms. Wilkins worked for law firms for 15 years, then spent several years at Cyrus Realty. The realty connection sparked the current venture and continues to be a source of clients.

Ms. Wilkins says she was "house-sitting at a realtors' open house" when the homeowner asked if he could hire her to manage his move to a two-bedroom condo. The sisters say their children feared



Smith & Joans would be another excuse for them to collect stuff. Quite the opposite proved true. "Every morning I clean out another closet," says Ms. Wilkins.

They understand that for their clients, downsizing means letting go of tangibles steeped in memories. "Small

Sisters Mary Lou Smith (left) and Joanie Wilkins bring a sense of humor and years of experience to the often grim process of downsizing. Their new business, Smith & Joans Shrinking Homes, guides clients through every step – including furniture placement.

Photo by Mary Mumbrue

things are more emotional," they find. "Half the job is talking to [clients]," Ms. Smith says. "We're house whisperers." In a way, she says, "It's like being a psychologist."

They begin by taking stock of what will fit in a client's new residence. The sisters, who visit clients together but have separate roles behind the scenes, lay the place out on graph paper. Then they work with clients to "furnish" it with scaled representations of their furniture.

One way of helping people let go is to "discuss the joy of giving things away and seeing people enjoy them while you're alive," the two say. Reluctant customers also appreciate hearing that the things they sell at an estate sale – things the client's own family members say they do not want – are on their way to becoming treasures and heirlooms for the purchaser's family.

They photograph favorite pieces that must be left behind for a client's keepsake book. And when all forms of persuasion fail, they say, "If something means a lot to you, then put it under the bed."



Contact us for a Consultation

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Scaling
down
can
be simple.



We're with you from start to finish!

Suggest Furniture Placement

- Help you decide what fits in your new place

Hold Estate Sale

- Review, select items to sell
- Clean, price and tag
- Advertise sale to public
- Check and sales receipts to owner

Make Donations

- Items not sold will be donated to charity
- List of donations to owner for tax purposes

Remove Everything Not Wanted

- Everything no longer wanted will be hauled away

Leave Broom Clean

- Cleaning service will leave home broom clean for new owners

Let Smith & Joans make scaling down simple for you. We can coordinate your move for a smooth transition to the next chapter of your life.

Helping you decide what fits in your new place and what needs to be sold is where we begin.

We have the resources to simplify this overwhelming process.