

# THE *Diva* OF DOWNSIZING

By Rachel Simpson  
Staff Writer

*Barbara Perman of Amherst  
has made a career out of  
helping seniors move to  
smaller digs*

There's a lot more to moving than just packing boxes.

Just ask Barbara Z. Perman – she's been helping people move for eight years. Planning and organizing are crucial, she says, as are emotional and physical support. She provides all of that and more in her business, Moving Mentor, Inc.

Perman, founder and president of the Amherst-based company, specializes in helping seniors as they downsize and relocate from their homes to smaller living spaces. Perman and her crew can take care of the move from its initial stages of planning to sorting and packing and planning for a point beyond the moving and unpacking of furniture and household items. She works with families, with seniors themselves and even with retirement and assisted-living communities, facilitating every aspect of the move if the senior desires. She helps people move through changes in productive and rewarding ways, she says. "Many older people think they can do a move like this by themselves because they have never needed help moving before. They are very self-reliant. They don't realize that they need to save their energy for the tasks that only they can do," Perman says, adding that they can delegate many tasks to other people.

She targets seniors specifically because she knows that's the group that most needs help. She notes some key statistics: first, the fastest-growing part of the population is over 75 years of age; second, in 2000, at least one-third of all homeowners were age 65 or older; and third,



one in every five Americans will be over 65 by the year 2010.

"More and more seniors are in their homes and stuck," she says. "Sometimes the adult children can't get there enough to really make a difference," she says. Sometimes people think they're not ready to move.

However, sometimes waiting too long to start thinking about moving can be dangerous, she says. Often by the time people feel mentally ready it is too late, because their options have narrowed. Additionally, the waiting list for senior housing and retirement communities can be several years long, she says.

After working as an educator for 30 years, Perman got her start in the business a little less than a decade ago, when she moved her own mother, who had been living in the same home for 48 years.

"It was an activity I knew was always going to be there and I dreaded it, but it turned into a wonderful time for both of us. We took our time and were able to share the happy times and sad times in a way that

allowed her to make the next steps,” Perman says.

That’s what she does with her clients.

### **How it works**

When Perman is first contacted – either by a senior, a family member or even a facility – she arranges to meet with the people who are moving, or contemplating moving, or family members concerned about moving.

“Sometimes an adult child will call and say, ‘I can’t even broach the subject with my parents, but I know we need to think about it. Can you talk with us?’” she says.

According to one of her publications, Perman will help seniors set goals and priorities, make meaningful decisions and organize their thinking; assist with possession disbursement; work with family members; find and work with experts, including appraisers, real estate agents and movers; and help seniors settle into their new homes.

For family members, Perman will assess the situation and come up with a plan; find appropriate housing or care; arrange for services; sort possessions and arrange for deliveries or pickups; plan furniture placement in the new space; develop inventories of belongings; supervise the move; pack and unpack; and prepare the new home.

When she works with facilities, Perman does many of the same things, and also conducts presentations and events for prospects, clients and staff.

After that, Perman gets down to business.

She may spend hours with seniors sorting through desk drawers, attics, rooms and more as they begin the process of downsizing. “It can be really difficult to make decisions,” she says. So she’ll advise starting with two categories: “I definitely want to keep this” and “I definitely don’t want to keep this.” From there, things can be sorted – and items removed – again.

When people are unable to do the actual sorting themselves, either because they can’t see well or it’s hard for them to stand and move around, she’ll let them be armchair managers. “We will bring piles of stuff to them,” she says.

In the process, Perman says, people may find deeds to cemetery plots, records of where people were buried, stock certificates and other things that have been lost for years.

Doing such work can be emotional, and Perman and her associates provide support. “When you go through every closet and drawer, and read with people their old letters, you really get close,” she says.

In that process, Perman will help people “create a new mission statement for themselves, set some goals and think about what they want to do with this part of their life, she says. “Sometimes going through things will remind people of threads of their lives that aren’t complete. They can still do them, and want to set a course for that.”

It is crucial to work out all the details of moving in a healthy way, Perman says. She recalled a client who wasn’t going to have room for her beautiful antique dining room set and several other pieces that came from her mother and grandmother. Those pieces, Perman says, were not sold but put in storage for more than a year until the client was settled and able to make decisions about them. “There’s a lot of psychological peace in holding on a little longer,” she says.

Perman does custom packing, in which the contents of each box are organized by room and importance, specially packed if needed, and labeled. “We know where everything is and what will happen to it when it is moved. Everything is done with a logic,” she says.

And in that process, exciting things can happen. One of Perman’s clients was a Northampton woman who was talented at a range of crafts. “She had all her stuff in every room, all over the house,” Perman says. Those items were gathered together, and Perman and the woman were able to create a whole room dedicated to the work in the new home.

Perman will draw floor plans of the new space so that both clients and movers know exactly where everything is going. She’ll

hire movers, trash haulers, and other professionals as needed.

And most importantly, she'll spend time with seniors as they look back on their lives.

Perman will also help clients get their homes ready to sell. In fact, says Frank Taplin, "after Barbara helped get our house ready to show, it sold the very first day. She knew exactly what to do." Perman also hired someone to appraise the Taplins' furniture before it was moved in case there was any loss or damage, and she hired an auctioneer to sell items the Taplins decided to disburse.

The Taplins hired Perman to help with their move from a home they had lived in for 38 years to a retirement community in South Hadley. The couple's four children do not live in the area.

"I have a reputation for being a pack rat," Taplin says. "We had four floors full of stuff I thought I couldn't get along without."

Enter Perman. She and her assistant went through "every room and every drawer," Taplin says, and encouraged the couple to get rid of what they could. They then packed everything, and before the Taplins even finished their move, Perman unpacked the whole kitchen. "We have all our dishes and mugs, and could start living there right off the bat," Taplin says.

"Everything was neatly collected and put in little plastic bags; everything was identified, so it was all at our fingertips.

"Barbara did the lion's share of all the work," Taplin says. "Somebody had to."

### **Another perspective**

When adult children call, things may shape up a bit differently.

Perman remembers some children who called and said they had tried everything with their parents, who lived on Cape Cod, but could still not get them to consider consolidating and moving. Finally, she says, she told the children to start with their own houses and their own stuff – getting rid of things they had held onto for years and packing other items.

"There's a kind of energy that develops, and it will get the parents moving," she says.

"They'll say, 'Ohhh, the children are making room for stuff,' and then the children will begin to come and take stuff ... and then it will turn out that one of the kids is still storing stuff at his parents' home!"

In another case, Perman worked over the last summer to move a couple whose four children had spent a year rotating every other weekend at the parents' home, trying to downsize books, clothes and other items. But by the time the children got there, spent some time with their parents and caught up with their immediate needs, little time was left for actual sorting and packing.

"They were pressed and pressured, and finally their parents, who had gotten our name from a Realtor and from the retirement community, called us. We worked with them intensively to move." Perman says.

Other times Perman will just do an initial consultation and some follow-up telephone work, and that's enough.

On the other end of the spectrum, clients sometimes ask her to stay on after the move, helping with various tasks, doing a second layer of downsizing, or helping with paperwork and filing. Occasionally after a move a spouse will die, and the survivor will call Perman and her group in because they are already familiar with them, she explains.

Perman says it is hard to estimate how much her services will cost, because each client's needs are different.

She notes that for someone who has been in his or her home for 40 years and not regularly cleaned out the space, the job may take several weeks or even months, and the cost may be as high as \$5,000.

"It's an important emotional and financial investment," Perman says.

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