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Giving homes that 'must buy' look

Stager Jane Guest helps ease older clients through the process of downsizing

By PAUL DELEAN, The Gazette December 1, 2009 [Be the first to post a comment](#)

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Former magazine executive Jane Guest has begun a new

career as a "home stager," a person who cuts through the clutter and helps homeowners make the best use of space for selling their property.

Photograph by: Pierre Obendrauf, The Gazette

Jane Guest likes things neat, tidy and organized. It served her well in a long career as a magazine executive, and now, at 59, it's helped her reinvent herself as a solo entrepreneur.

Guest has become a "home stager," working with real-estate agents and their clients to put a home in its best light for a quick sale at a good price.

Her company, GentleMove, also helps people downsize into smaller living quarters, a challenge now facing growing numbers of Canadian seniors. Guest got that idea after assisting her own mother through two moves after her father died.

"It was daunting enough, and I lived nearby. I wondered how people did it if they didn't have children in the same city, or had absolutely no time," she said in an interview.

Editing decades of accumulated belongings to fit into living spaces as small as one room is not an easy task - not if you're doing it right.

Guest does not take the job lightly. She starts by analyzing the new location and determining what can fit. Then she and the client go over the belongings to determine what should stay and what goes. She helps them pack and prepare for the movers, then assists again at the new location, with the goal of making it welcoming and meaningful.

Surplus items generally are distributed among relatives, given to charity or sold.

"An older woman I worked with wanted to just get rid of some old furniture, but I thought it might have value and we got it included in an estate sale. She got \$2,000 for it and was thrilled. It paid for the move and then some," Guest said.

The concept is a bit different with home staging, where the objective isn't so much to reduce as redeploy.

Guest starts with a two-hour, \$150 consultation, which leads to a written list of suggestions for the house and contents.

"I try to meet with both the husband and wife, and even the children if possible, so all understand what it's meant to achieve. I'm not there to judge taste, decor or furniture. It's not decorating; it's undecorating, simplifying, decluttering, rejigging furniture and artwork to make best use of the space. A lot of people are spatially or colour challenged; I'm not. I'm there to help them sell their biggest investment as fast as possible, for the highest price possible with the least amount of disruption. I realize some people think it makes no sense to spend money on something that's about to be sold, but the cost is always less than a first price reduction."

A client can opt out after the initial analysis, but nine out of 10 ask Guest to also go the extra step, overseeing execution of the plan. That can be anything from storing or rearranging a few pieces of furniture to repainting the house or bringing in rented items to fill or liven up rooms.

"Home staging is a serious business. It's recreating a space, not simply fluffing up a few pillows. It's also not just for high-end spaces. I've staged for a \$180,000 property. So many home buyers today check the Internet first, so it's important the photos they see catch their eye," Guest said.

She now deals with about 20 real-estate agents on a regular basis. "When an agent gives me a listing they worked hard to get, I handle it with care. I'll tweak and massage it until it's harmonious, balanced and simple. I want that 'wow' effect when people walk in."

A longtime advertising executive for Toronto Life and Fashion magazines, Guest retired at 54 after 28 years in the publishing industry.

"The company had been sold, my job description changed, I wasn't fully on-board with the new strategy. It was a good time to rethink things. And I'd always been curious about test-driving my skills in other areas."

That led to GentleMove and other pursuits, including the presentation of workshops in French and English on how to sell advertising, and working as an event and wedding planner. "I love weddings, love everything to do with them," said Guest, who got that bug during a year as editor and associate publisher of the magazine Marions Nous.

With such a diversity of sidelines, Guest is investing a lot of hours in her business, but she doesn't find it unmanageable or unpleasant.

"Everything I'm doing now, I have a passion for," she said. "It's not like work, really. It's fun to do."

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