

THE NEWS-PRESS

Exclusive: Mementos Become Memories

Downsizing can be made easier with the help of a senior move manager



Karen Benson, right, owner of Inspire Transitions, comforts Edie Kingsley, 86, while organizing Kingsley's belongings before moving to a downsized apartment. / Brian Hirten/news-press.com

Edie Kingsley lingered over two pages of a train schedule from Munich to Salzburg one morning in the Fort Myers apartment where she had spent three decades.

Within a week, she would be downsizing from the 2,150-square foot condo with views of the Caloosahatchee River to a 1,110-square-foot space in a complex for seniors that offers meals, friends and support.

She was purging junk from the things worthy of the space they occupied. The train route was one she had ridden often on visits to her parents once they returned to their native Europe and, decades later, where she would place candles and flowers on their graves.

"It's just two little pieces of paper. It's not much," Kingsley said, looking to Jaime Lynn Goss, one of the interior designers managing her move. Goss smiled. Kingsley slipped the papers into a shoebox.

Wading through her belongings reminded her of her 86 uncommon years of life. A chest in her living room unearthed memories of a narrow escape from the Russians. A wig stowed in the hall brought back a story of champagne with Margaret Thatcher.

A 2008 receipt for gas from New Milford, Pa., well, that was just junk.

“All the sudden, you don’t feel like a frisky teenager anymore,” Kingsley said. “It has gone fairly quickly. My dad used to say, ‘Our life has not always been easy but, by God, it has never been dull.’ Truer words have never been spoken.”

Decision



Downsizing was a decision Kingsley came to on her own. Last fall, she told her son Buddy Kingsley and his wife Sherry over dinner at their North Fort Myers home she was giving serious thought to moving.

She was ready to stop driving because of numbness in her feet. She was tired of cooking for one. There was only so much green Jell-O one person could eat. It got lonely.

Thank you, her son told her,

relieved.

It’s likely you will need help with daily living as you age. A quarter of the population, or about 230,000 people, in Lee and Collier counties is 65 and older. Making the decision to move from a longtime home can be difficult.

“It’s a representation of independence and freedom of taking care of one’s self,” said Eric Flusche, supportive aging services director for Senior Friendship Centers in Lee County. “It represents a different time of their life.”

Whether a senior goes gracefully or needs a push from adult children largely depends on personality, said Dotty St. Amand, executive director of the Alvin A. Dubin Alzheimer’s Resource Center in Fort Myers.

“There are people who don’t want to make the decision for themselves or can’t make a decision for themselves.”

St. Amand recommends having frank family conversations about downsizing, as does AARP. The organization also suggests considering a senior move manager. That is where Karen L. Benson & Associates in Fort Myers entered the picture for Kingsley. Part of the interior design business, Inspire Transitions, is dedicated to moving seniors. Benson is a certified relocation and transition specialist.

Having an outside person to sort and manage the details staved off familial tension, said Buddy Kingsley, a building contractor who is 56.

His mother, he believes, would not have listened as readily to him.

“Having an objective voice saying, ‘Maybe you should keep this and maybe you shouldn’t keep this,’ it was absolutely huge.”

Benson seeks to create a home that is familiar but also the right size for the space.

“We’re helping somebody go through a really hard time in their life to get something that works for them and that still feels like their home,” she said. “People’s things help define them.”

Sorting



It was the third week of sorting; piles of doodads, pictures and papers sprouted like plants from Kingsley's coffee table.

A sprinkling of paintings remained in the living room as did framed photos of Cornell University's campus, which were definite keepers.

The university is at the root of why she's American.

Her father, Peter Babiy, an Austrian wasp expert, was recruited to curate its insect collection. Her parents came to

Ithaca, N.Y., as newlyweds. Edie arrived in 1925. Her father insisted she and her younger brother and sister speak German at the dinner table.

When Edie was around 15, she and her family returned to Vienna after her father received a job offer at the natural history museum. A few years later, in 1945, the Russians moved into Vienna.

At the time, Edie was teaching kindergarten as part of a year of service in the countryside after high school.

A single suitcase in tow, she escaped in the bed of a truck and her family fled to unoccupied territory.

Among the family keepsakes left behind in an aunt's home: a stately tabernacle chest that is now more than two centuries old. The chest survived the occupation; the locks on its drawers were casualties.

Edie inherited the chest, which sat in her living room with a tag that read: Move Me. She will take that, too.

Around 1946, Edie decided to return to the United States and Ithaca. Five years later, she met her husband Ralph Kingsley. Six months after they met, they married. Two children, Cathi and Buddy, followed.

On a trip to Florida, her husband discovered the balmy weather kept his injured thumb from aching so they traded Ithaca's snow for Fort Myers' sunshine in 1967. Here is where Edie began a more than 30-year career in real estate. They moved to the apartment in 1981.

She and Ralph made frequent trips abroad for real estate conferences and to visit family. For one trip to London, Edie bought a chestnut brown wig. The wig was now in a mound of things to donate.

It reminded her of a trip to London in the 1980s. One of her cousins had arranged for his friend, Margaret Thatcher, to speak at a fundraiser at a boy's school. He invited Edie and Ralph. Her husband forgot his dress pants, so he wore jeans.

Over champagne after the speech, her cousin told Thatcher the story of the pants. Thatcher, as Edie recalled, looked her husband up and down and said, "Good for you, Ralph. I love your part of the world."

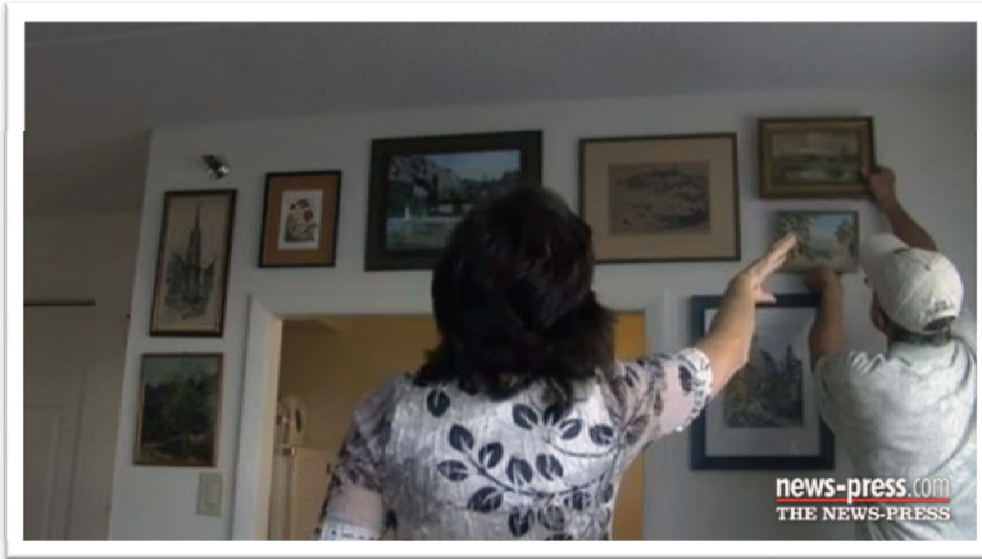
Eleven years ago, Ralph died with pulmonary fibrosis, thickening of the lungs.

There are times when she is lonely but she has kept busy. She has sat on the board for Friends of the Library at least 10 years, adding to a civic resume that includes more than 1,900 volunteer hours for Lee Memorial Health System and 18 years with the American Lung Association.

While sorting, there were times she wanted to have a good cry but she enjoyed having the friendly faces around.

"It's nice to have company," she said. "I've had to adapt to so many situations in my life that this is just one more."

New place



At 4 p.m. on a recent day, the lobby in Calusa Harbour in Fort Myers was stocked with chatting, laughing gray-haired residents in nightshirts and slippers for a special pajama happy hour. It had the feel of a college dorm taken over by seniors.

Upstairs, Buddy and Sherry Kingsley, Karen Benson and Jaime Lynn Goss hustled to hang the final paintings in Edie Kingsley's new apartment. The antique chest sat in her living

room.

They unrolled Oriental rugs, arranged sunflowers in a vase and turned a Claude Debussy symphony on the stereo. The floor plan was one the designers had settled on with Edie weeks ago. Edie spent the day in Sarasota with her daughter, far from the stress of unpacking.

"Knock, knock," Edie called into the open door.

"Surprise!" shouted Sherry, as the quartet stopped to welcome her.

Edie peered inside and sighed. Tears formed in her blue eyes.

"It's beautiful! It's homey. I love it," she said. "I'm tickled pink."

She hadn't expected to cry. Buddy poured champagne into goblets and glasses.

"I make a toast that Edie has as much fun in the next 30 years as she did in the last 30 years," said Benson, lifting her glass.

Edie chortled. She doesn't believe she has 30 years left but is happy to spend the time she does have at her new home.

She'll miss watching the boats from her old balcony but her new apartment offers perhaps even more stunning panoramas.

She's looking forward to the gorgeous sunrises and sunsets to come.

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