

Downsizing: Personal Property



by Dorothy Long

If you are downsizing, making plans for travel or buying a second home in a more balmy climate, it is just as important to include your personal property along with your finances in your estate plan. Whatever your goals are for this new chapter in your life, knowing that your wishes have been clearly communicated to your loved ones provides better peace of mind and a sense of well-being for everyone.

As a personal property appraiser for over 12 years, I am usually called in by families when the time has come to move parents into assisted living, across the country to live with family or for the final estate documentation. I am always surprised at how little the families know about the “things” that their families treasured and

the owners are now unable to remember or have kept little documentation.

If only they had done some planning together before these events came up everyone would know exactly what to do and how to disperse the personal property effectively.

This should be a time for reflection and thought about the items that do hold memories, and to document and pass on the histories that made these treasures so important to keep. Photographing everything that is part of your personal property “collection” is a smart idea for insurance purposes at any stage, but essential as we take stock of our most prized possessions for our estates. An inventory with photographs, statements of what the items are, what they are worth, and how you wish to dispose of them in your estate is a document that can simplify any stage of life when downsizing, moving, gifting and donating over many years to come. It is never too soon to take control of these assets.

Besides, it is great fun to talk with everyone about the memories and how certain things became “part of the family”. The painting that grandmother was given by an artist friend 60 years ago, may now be by an important artist whose work continues to increase in value. Knowing how and where it was acquired can become very important in knowing how to handle the work in an estate. If one person is going to acquire a valuable item then the others need to be equitably compensated. If no one wants “the ugly thing” then a donation to an institution can be considered for tax purposes or the work can be sold and the funds divided.

This is also the way to divide the property fairly with everyone getting some items that hold monetary worth and some that have sentimental worth. Over time this may evolve, as the worth of an item may increase or decrease, or the preferences change as family life styles change, so it is good to have an assessment every few years as you would for any good financial plan. Too often families are divided because one member gained more than others in an estate. This is always something I find very disconcerting because it could have been easily avoided with some planning.

Possessions are never the most important part of life but they can hold memories that live on for many generations or provide the much needed capital for future ventures.

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