

Sandwich generation seeks relief through concierge service

By Jennifer McDougall, For Neighbours May 7, 2009

More than a quarter of Canadian adults split their time and financial resources between care for an aging or disabled parent and their own children. They take time from work to escorts their elders to medical appointments in the daytime while their evenings are filled with the soccer games and dance recitals of their children.

Many are women like business owner Debbie Orban who, with her husband, runs errands and cleans house for her mother-in-law. Last fall, when the Orbans set off on a business trip, they worried for the senior Mrs. Orban. With no other family members available, who would check in on her?



A friend suggested they inquire about assistance for the elderly at a concierge service. Orban discovered Time is Money Executive Concierge was in the process of taking their business in a new direction: senior services. This new arm would be dedicated to helping clients care for their elder family members with a range of tasks from light housekeeping, bill paying, shopping, and booking medical appointments to providing transportation.

While the Orbans travelled, Time is Money owner Cynthia Pickering picked up a shopping list from their mother, Katharina and delivered her groceries. "Cynthia was so kind, she unpacked the groceries, put them away, and then made the two of them a cup of tea."

Orban was pleased that her mother-in-law appreciated the help, but more importantly Katharina enjoyed the afternoon visit. "Cynthia wasn't in a hurry and she seemed to really care about our mother. She wasn't just there to do a job." Pickering was willing to sit and share stories, showing a sincere interest in Katharina's early life in Germany. "It was a comfort knowing she could call someone other than us if she needed anything."

Orban had "a good feeling" about Pickering the first time they spoke on the phone. Upon meeting Pickering, it's easy to see how she lifts her clients' spirits with the friendly way she interacts. Her bubbly and energetic personality is complimented by a professionalism that instils the confidence necessary to allow a stranger to care for a loved one.



A trusted relationship becomes especially important when she and her staff tackle the more complicated personal matters that cross her desk.

Families often ask Time is Money to organize an older person's living space. Pickering has discovered that the objectivity she and her staff have is valuable for those families struggling with a senior whose saving and hoarding crowds their home. While relatives may have the will to step in, it can be counterproductive. Young family members may haul in their own sentimental feelings and emotional attachment to collected items, stalling the process. For these families, Pickering and her team provide advice from a fresh perspective to help the senior figure out a solution that works for them.

Other requests for assistance include resources for families separated by distance.

Madonna and Angus Blanchard's 10 children and 25 grandchildren help out whenever they can, but many of them live in other cities. It was granddaughter Dawn Tobin in Fort McMurray who connected the family with Time is Money to make a difference in her grandparents' daily lives.

"We have a large family but everyone is busy with jobs and their own families, so it can be difficult to find the time to help them when they need it," says Tobin. "We can't always get down to Calgary to visit and I don't know the city well enough to help them find what they need from here."

For Madonna and Angus, their immediate concern is finding a new place to live, so Tobin and her parents hired Time is Money.

With a list of special requirements in hand, Pickering and her staff are using their Calgary network to seek out suitable accommodations for the couple, whose hurdles in recent years have included cancer, stroke, asthma, diabetes, and crippling arthritis.

Tobin receives progress reports on the search every two days. Tobin says bringing in support for a non-invasive task like this is a good introduction to outside assistance for her grandparents and that it may prepare the way for a concierge to fill gaps again in the future. Tobin senses her grandparents do not wish to interfere with their children's lives.



When a professional service is performing the task, the guilty feelings disappear. Pat Blanchard, Tobin's uncle and one of the couple's youngest children, believes it is important to respect the couple's independence and support their self esteem by allowing them as much autonomy as possible.

"I try to come by five or six times a week, but I have my work and my own family. It's busy." Blanchard is glad his parents have several family members near by, but he notes many other Calgarians are not so fortunate.

Time is Money has designed a customized pricing schedule sensitive to fixed incomes so that the seniors themselves are able to pay, should they choose.

Like Tobin, Orban was pleasantly surprised at the reasonable rate of \$20 - \$25/hour.

Her mother-in-law has since called on Time is Money to help with errands here and there and Orban says she won't hesitate to use them in the future, perhaps even for her own errands. "I don't like shopping for gifts -- maybe I should call them to help me too."

For more information, go to <http://www.timeismoney.ca/seniors.shtml>.

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald