

Empty the Nest: A mom-and-pop business (sort of)



Sophia Khori
Staff writer-
Minneapolis /
St. Paul Business Journal

Sharon Fishchman founded Empty the Nest four years ago after clearing her parents' belongings out of their house following their deaths.

That experience, along with her eight years working in the moving business, convinced her there was an unfilled niche: helping families downsize their belongings as parents pass away or move to senior housing.

"It hit me on a different level when my parents passed, so that's why I decided I [had] to do something," Fischman said. She was especially frustrated to discover that the easiest option was to hire a garbage company, because she didn't want everything thrown away.

Empty the Nest does much of the heavy lifting of that difficult process while limiting the items that end up in the trash. For a fee, the 12-employee firm will clear out a home of everything a family doesn't want, selling the most reusable items in its Burnsville thrift store, recycling whatever else it can, and tossing the rest in a dumpster.

Expected proceeds from the thrift-store sales are deducted from the customers' estimate.

When Empty the Nest staff are done, the homes are completely empty and ready for their next step. The whole process takes between one and five days. Clients rave about the service, giving it an A+ rating on Angie's List and sending in reams of positive testimonials.

The secondhand shop has its fans, also, including mother-daughter thrifting duo Liz Russell and Kim Kershner.



“I always find the best stuff here,” Kershner said. Her list of best finds includes a \$3 clipper for her husband, two dining room tables, and a \$30 reclining chair that provided perfect seating for her mother after back surgery.

In the early days, Empty the Nest cleaned out one to two homes each month. Now it’s booking clean-outs three weeks in advance, and they’re happening daily. Due to the growth, it’s also seeking larger space for after its current lease expires.

Every part of Empty the Nest is built on the philosophy of giving back, Fischman said. “I want to make a difference in the environment and in people’s lives, and so that is why I think this succeeds, because people understand that and they see that happening.”

Fischman makes it a point to include a shelf in the thrift store dedicated to free items, which serves to not only make for minimum waste, but also to cater to those who may need the support. The store is approved by Greater Twin Cities United Way, so prices are meant to be affordable.

The future for Empty the Nest is expansion. Fischman said she has trademarked the name and has been having conversations with a nonprofit in Indianapolis to open a new location. She wants to make sure that her business has no kinks and is a well-oiled machine before she begins the process again.

Growth to this point hasn’t been seamless. For a while, labor was costing more than the store’s sales. So Fischman in July cut her staff of 24 employees in half and only opens her store three days a week, rather than six. She said these adjustments have allowed her company to become more effective and that the proof is in the numbers. Now, by opening up shop on the three days that brought in the most revenue, Empty the Nest is bringing in more revenue with less labor.

Fischman started Empty the Nest when she was 50 and said the work is both energizes and exhausting. “I never thought at this age that I would be working this hard or that I would be this happy.”