REAL ESTATE

Canwest

Former magazine executive Jane Guest has started 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.

# Home staging 'serious business'

By PAUL DELEAN
Canwest News Service

MONTREAL — 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 correctly.

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 to 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 English and French 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* (Let's Get Married).

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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CANADA

# Data may show two sides of the economy

By DEREK ABMA
Financial Post

OTTAWA — This week's economic reports will likely provide further examples of how Canada's economy continues to benefit from domestic forces while it struggles to profit from the global market.

Today Statistics Canada is slated to report retail sales for September, in which the fourth gain in five months is expected.

At the other end of the workweek, on Friday, the same government agency will provide the value of Canada's current account for the third quarter.

A growing deficit, as expected, would cap a full year of shortfalls that started in last year's fourth quarter after almost a full decade of surpluses.

The current account takes into consideration the trade of goods and services, and flow of investment income.

The consensus of economists on retail is that the value of transactions will be up 0.6 per cent in September, following a 0.8 per cent rise in August.

Automobile-related purchases, like the previous month, are thought to have driven much of the gains in September, as a smaller 0.4 per cent retail rise is forecast when excluding auto purchases.

"Much of the upward momentum in spending should come from motor-vehicle sales, which is poised to post its second consecutive month of strong gains," Millan Mulraine, economics strategist for TD Securities, said in a research note.

"Additional support should come from expenditures on housing-related items on account of the buoyancy in Canadian housing-market activity."

CIBC World Markets economist Krishen Rangasamy is expecting a gain in September retail numbers, but at 0.4 per cent, not as much other economists.

He said the impact of vehicle sales is being overestimated, as many of the purchases during the month were of cheaper models, adding less than one might think to the overall money intake.

"The CPI (consumer-price index) report, indeed, confirms that prices for new vehicles fell significantly in September, perhaps capping the increase in dealership revenues to something more modest than the gain in volumes," he said in a report Friday.

Rangasamy added that lower gasoline and food prices during the month would also limit overall gains in September retail sales.

Meanwhile, economists are forecasting Canada's current-account deficit rose to $13.2 billion in the third quarter from $11.2 billion in the second.

Mulraine is not far off the consensus on his current-account forecast, calling for a deficit of $13.5 billion. Besides the effect a high Canadian dollar has on making Canadian goods more expensive to export, Mulraine said it has hurt the services category in the account because the high loonie is encouraging Canadians to travel and spend abroad, and also damaged investment income because international returns are diminished when converted back to Canadian dollars.

Rangasamy forecast the current-account deficit is as high as $14 billion in the third quarter, which would be a record in absolute terms and amount to four per cent of GDP, the highest proportional level in 15 years.

A number of key reports on the U.S. economy will be forthcoming during the next week, including the second of three reports on third-quarter GDP on Tuesday. Last month, the U.S. Department of Commerce said the economy broke out of recession and grew 3.5 per cent on an annualized basis in the last quarter. The prevailing wisdom among economists is that the first assessment was somewhat optimistic, and this next report will put economic growth at 2.9 per cent.

Other U.S. data that's due include existing-home sales today, the U.S. Conference Board's consumer-confidence index on Tuesday and durable-goods orders on Wednesday.

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