

goodlife | HOLIDAY DECORATING

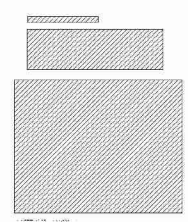
They'll deck your halls

BY ALISON O'LEARY MURRAY

OR FEED
YOUR PETS,
BALANCE
YOUR BOOKS,
AND MUCK
YOUR STALLS



Jen Conley (center) of GoodDeeds says her workweek expands to 60 hours as December looms. She and Melissa O'Toole (left) help homeowner Linda Shea (right) decorate for the holidays.



Red is Linda Shea's color.

Red is the color of the rug in the grand foyer of her hilltop contemporary colonial in Sudbury, as are the drapes in the adjoining formal living room. The upper walls of the dining room that open onto the foyer from the left are deep burgundy.

Soon after Thanksgiving, with the help of a few "elves," Shea's home will be splashed with even more red for the holidays: bows on a garland snaking up the banister to the second floor, the candy-striped adornment on the back-door wreath, and the all-out wrapping of the family room mantel in festive colors.

While she looks forward to holiday decorating every year, Shea avoids a lot of the stress associated with preparing for Christmas and the parties she throws, including gift wrapping and, especially, the cleanup, by hiring a group of women from GoodDeeds I.I.C., a Wellesley company, to help.

GoodDeeds president Beth Miller prefers the term "life management services" to "concierge" to describe the wide variety of resources offered, from researching colleges for clients' offspring to relocation and travel planning. Her business was recently selected as the concierge of choice for the Nouvelle at Natick condominiums.

"You don't want us picking up your dry cleaning," she says, noting the \$95 an hour price tag. But there's no shortage of local residents and businesses who outsource holiday stressors – like gift wrapping, writing and addressing holiday cards, and even shopping for family members – to the capable hands of her service and other similar ones.

"They do a great job on the staircase, all up here is decorated with nice bows and a lot of red," Shea says, pointing out details of her two-story foyer that would soon include figurines of carolers standing near the gas fireplace and gold ornaments on the dining table. An enormous wreath, wrapped in tiny lights, is set for the window above the front door and more decorations will line the front walk.

"We decorate the tree ourselves, it's a family tradition," says Shea, who sought GoodDeed's help wrapping gifts several years ago and has hired them for full-scale decorating three times. "I travel back and forth to my business on the Cape several times a week, so this is a huge stress reliever."

Jen Conley and Melissa O'Toole of GoodDeeds, two

of the women who will spend up to 20 hours decorating Shea's home and wrapping gifts for her, have already been scouting for spools of holiday ribbon at florist supply stores. They'll arrive with photos of last year's decorations to compare, and return after the New Year to pack everything away again.

The holiday services are a niche of GoodDeeds that has developed over the company's five years in business. "We have a lot of existing clients who ask us to do more during the holidays," says Conley, whose workweek expands to 60 hours as December looms.

"It's our favorite time of the year," says Miller. "We become people's security blanket during that time. They don't need to know what's going on behind the scenes, just that it gets done." ►

Other personalized businesses see a spike in activity as the holidays close in. Chantal Boxer of Boston's Fini Concierge, a four-year-old company with four employees, does event planning and coordinates home renovations as well as running a lot of errands for busy clients. During the holidays, Boxer is planning parties for clients, shopping for gifts, and also decorating.

"We get two trees for one of our clients, who puts on a big party in his house every year," says Boxer. "We get the trees primed with lights, but leave the rest so he can do personalized touches himself."

She acknowledges that her work may be unrecognized by those who attend the parties or admire the decorations, but Boxer enjoys her privileged relationships. She's privvy to intimate details such as how much a client spends on his family's holiday gifts.

"It's a joy to interact with interesting and diverse people," she says. "We get to help make their lives easier, to be part of their lives."

That's the sentiment among concierge business owners: They strive to excel at multitasking as well as providing comfort and a sense of peace to their clients.

Melissa Frank, of Wellesley, bills herself as Renta Yenta to emphasize the personalized aspect of her services. "Bubbe will take care of everything" says her Web site. Yet Frank, a former paralegal, is less the rotund grandmother her site advertises than a capable professional with a background in event planning who has corporate clients, has been hired to run a nonprofit organization, and loves to be challenged with requests.

"I have one client who's a lawyer. I do his grocery shopping, his laundry. I'm his Jewish mother," she says. "There are not as many connections among peo-

ple as there used to be, and everyone wants to feel taken care of. Everyone deserves a little Jewish chicken soup.”

While there might not be as many corporate holiday gifts to buy for clients during a poor economy, Frank says her business continues to grow because people are working more hours. “People who are working harder don’t have as much time to do their Christmas shopping,” she says.

Another concierge, Carolyn Krause, who does business as Hands of Time, in Boston, has a theory about people in her field. “Many of us are Jewish because we don’t have big Christmas shopping lists and we like to shop,” she says.

Krause’s first career was in retail. As a concierge, she had focused on pet care – including medically fragile family companions – but is now branching out into personal shopping and menu-planning services as well.

“It’s amazing how trusting people are,” she says. “Sometimes they’re giving me a key to their homes after our first meeting.”

One family has six cats, including an affectionate 17-pound Persian that she enjoys visiting while his owners travel. “It’s like being a grandma. I get the joy, but they’re not in my house all the time. There’s no litter box or vet bills.” *

Alison O’Leary Murray is an editor for GateHouse Media.

YOU WANT WHAT?

Concierge services get unusual requests

► MUCKING OUT A SHEEP BARN

“I couldn’t say no but I was not willing to do it myself,” says Melissa Frank of Renta Yenta. “I was flummoxed for a while, but I did some research and now I have a few names of people in case anyone calls me for that again.”

► FINDING A MESSENGER PIGEON

“We managed to find a breeder. They’re still around, but it wasn’t easy to find,” says Chantal Boxer of Finis Concierge. “Apparently our client had two offices near each other” and wanted to send something more personal than a fax.



Linda Shea (center) appreciates the holiday help from Jen Conley and Melissa O'Toole.

PHOTOS BY ALLAN JUNG