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## Staging-First Impressions Count

By Andrea A. Firth



Jenifer Brunk (L) and Gray Hynes in a home they recently staged. Photo Doug Kohen

paint, repair, and update. Empty homes can be furnished with rented furniture, art, and accessories, or stagers will work with existing home furnishings, rearrange the old, and mix in new pieces. Most stagers will do as much or as little of the legwork to get the home prepared as a client wants.

"You want people to remember the house," says Winters, but she acknowledges that this can be challenging in an area that has a number of generic, and often dated, ranch homes. "Sometimes the challenge is adding some character to the house, and that's when being eclectic can help."

Winters, a self-described collector, maintains a 6,500-foot warehouse in Lafayette filled with a huge assortment of furniture, bedding, art, and accessories to support her staging and furniture rental businesses. "I like to add a bit of humor and levity to my staging designs," says Winters who aims for variety and is comfortable mixing contemporary and Chinese pieces and throwing in an animal print for contrast and pop. "I'll do whatever is fitting for the house and put a twist on it to give it that wow factor," she adds.

Jenifer Brunk and Gray Hynes were two of the first stagers to work in the Lamorinda area. The two college friends, both longtime Orinda residents, purchased their staging business, Improve to Move, 18 years ago. "Early on we spent a lot of time explaining the staging concept to realtors and buyers, but it's a well accepted practice now, it's expected," says Brunk. "We don't have a specific style," says Brunk, "We stage a home to showcase what's special about that house," Although the approaches employed by stagers may vary, it all comes back to the sale.

"We want the buyer to be able to picture themselves in the home," says Hynes. She and Brunk keep a small inventory of linens and accessories and rent furniture through a large supplier in San Francisco. "They constantly turnover their inventory and keep up with the styles and trends. It's a fabulous resource," says Brunk.

Less is more for stagers who universally find that clutter is distracting and personal items don't sell a home. But in today's market, sellers are often still living in the staged home, so the stager is faced with striking a workable compromise. "There is a delicate balance to be achieved, because selling and moving is often emotional for the homeowner," says Layng, "Good stagers are sensitive to the homeowner's needs and have away of making him or her feel good about the staging process."

With the widespread use of online real estate marketing, stagers are now also faced with staging for both the live and virtual tour. "People are buying houses using the internet, so you want to be sure that the house looks great in photographs, too," says Isely. And, the details count when it comes to staging. A newly painted mailbox, clean windows, a new doormat - all give the impression that a house is well maintained. "All those little things do matter," says Isely, "It's all about making a great first impression."

Nikolene Isely

Staging by Design

www.stagerbydesign.com

Staging is akin to putting on pearls with a little black dress, says Nikolene Isely who owns Staging by Design based in Moraga. "The idea is to make the house, not the contents, the star," says Isely. Barbara Winters, the owner of Staging & Design in Lafayette, employs a similar analogy to explain the concept of staging. "If you put on a little lipstick, you always look better," says Winters. "Staging is like putting a little lipstick on a house."

Stagers in Lamorinda share a common goal-maximizing the sale. "Staging a home really does put more money in the seller's pocket. It leads to a quicker sale and a higher price," says realtor Sue Layng, a founding member of Village Associates Real Estate in Orinda. "We have a wealth of talented and caring stagers in this area," adds Layng, noting that almost every property her firm sells is staged at some level.

Stagers in Lamorinda provide a wide range of services to ready homes for sale. The cost to stage a home, typically based on time (the stager's fee) and materials (furniture rental fees), can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars depending on the services used and the length of time on the market. Stagers will consult on home décor design and color and manage contractors to

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Furniture and accessories housed at Barbara Winters' warehouse in Lafayette. Photos Doug Kohen



Staged rooms are clutter-free and incorporate attractive accents.

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