

Moving to South Florida? Here is someone who can help with relocation services

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Anyone who has moved to a new community understands the frustration of learning where to shop or find a doctor, how to connect up utilities and how to integrate into an area that is unfamiliar.

For Osmara Lazo and her husband, moving from Guayaquil, Ecuador to Weston last February involved even deeper problems including different cultural ways of doing things, obtaining immigration papers and work permits and getting children settled into school.

Enter Rita Hernandez of Weston who, as she describes it, provides a “hand-holding service” to new residents who need help relocating to south Florida.

“The relocation industry is a multibillion dollar industry,” Hernandez said. She estimates that she has helped 25 families/people relocate to south Florida from other countries during the past year through her company, Premier Destination Services.

Most of Hernandez’s clients are multi-national companies that are moving executives here to open or staff a local office.

“There are many differences to which they have to adjust,” Hernandez said. “They come from a situation where many of them have maids, cooks and gardeners and they can’t afford that here.” Hernandez helps them to learn that they will have to do their own cooking, cleaning and laundry.

“In Ecuador when I wanted to go somewhere, I left the children with my mother-in-law,” said Lazo. “Here, I don’t have anybody to take care of them so I just take them along.”

“Many of them feel frustrated at the beginning,” Hernandez explained. “They feel like they are on vacation. During the first three months they go through a lot of troubles and have to learn that they are not on vacation but they are actually living here.”

Hernandez takes her clients to get a driver’s license, to sign up for social security and to enroll their children in school.

“Rita helped me to rent furniture for my house,” Lazo remembered. “She showed me where to buy food, how to get the phone and the lights and the water and the cable TV connected.”

“This is the first time we have lived outside of our country and away from our family,” Lazo said. “It was very easy to make the adjustment with her. She was very nice.”

Sometimes the needs of newcomers are specialized. “I had one spouse who was a candle maker,” Hernandez said. “I helped her find a store where she could get her supplies.”

For others, the needs that relocation experts address can make the difference between a successful move and one doomed to failure.

“Many people who want to come and start a business don’t have a credit history,” explained Jackie Cardozo who operates a relocation company, All Star Solutions, with offices in Weston and Sunrise. “Without a credit history they can’t buy a car or get insurance easily, so they end up paying a high price.”

Cardozo, who lives in Weston, said that she knows what it is like to relocate to another country—she moved to south Florida from Venezuela a year and a half ago.

“We help people to understand how business is done here and the importance of networking,” said Cardozo who explained that in many Latin countries, businessmen establish contacts from childhood so don’t always need formal networking programs.

Hernandez specializes in corporate relocations, contracting with large companies to settle their people in the U.S. “We work as a team,” said Rita Shannon of Deerfield Beach who works for the Graebel moving company there and refers a lot of business to Hernandez. “Ninety percent of our moving business is corporate,” Shannon said. “We do the packing, loading, shipping and unpacking, but Rita really helps them settle in.”

Hernandez works regularly with large corporations such as Caterpillar, Citrix Systems, ZLB Bioplasma, Imation and Energizer.

“We also do a lot of moves for Citibank, especially from Argentina,” said Happy Kuryla of Coconut Grove who handles many of Hernandez’s clients in Miami-Dade County. “With the economic problems there, they are relocating a lot of their people to south Florida.”

Hernandez said that she is currently working with around eight Citibank families moving the Coral Gables area.

Cardozo also works with corporate moves, but said that most of her clients come to her privately or by referral.

As with Hernandez, who was born in the U.S. but spent part of her childhood in Colombia, Cardozo attracts mostly Latin American clients. “I have advertised a bit in some countries where there is economic or political turmoil and people are likely to want to leave the country,” she said citing contacts in Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil.

Working with newcomers starts long before they arrive in south Florida. “We try to help them before they move to see what they need and help them know what papers they will have to get,” Hernandez said.

“Many times they come here before their move to look over the community,” Cardozo said. “Then we help them for about three months after they relocate here.”

While working with large corporate accounts, relocation specialists say that the work is very personal. “You introduce them to restaurants, enroll their children in school and help them find a soccer league,” Hernandez said. “You help them to ease their frustration at the beginning of their life here.”

“In their first three months, they go through some troubles, adjusting to living here,” Hernandez said. “If we can help them connect with groups and establish a social life, it can prevent them from moving back because of frustration.”

“Many people from Latin America think it is easy to settle here because everybody speaks Spanish,” said Sonia Ramiroff of Weston, Cardozo’s business partner. “But, that’s not so—Florida is very complex and there is so much bureaucracy.”

“After the first six months, the honeymoon is over,” Cardozo said. “But after two years, they are really at home here.”

There is satisfaction for those in this line of work. “It is extremely rewarding because you become their friend,” Hernandez said. “You become a part of their lives and are invited to parties and dinners.”

“Helping the clients is like going the extra mile,” Cardozo explained. “When you spend eight hours a day running errands with them in the car, you get to know them well.”

“The people you help are wonderful people,” Kuryla said. “They are grateful and often invite you to dinner or give you gifts.”

Hernandez, who also has counselors in Orlando and Tampa, said that the work is very time-intensive. “The success of the business is to be out there and be available,” Hernandez said. “I’m here as a service and a resource.”

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