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the HOME FRONT

Your Weekly Westchester Real Estate Roundup

When Cleaning Up, There are Many Options to Choose



By Bill Primavera

down payment.

But my wife told me that while she would manage our finances, cook every meal

When my wife and I bought our first home, there was just one housekeeping rule: we must have a cleaning service. Neither one of us was making much money at the time and we were stretched financially after the

(which she has done superbly every day since), raise our child and find us bargains, the cleaning must be done by someone else. More than fair, I thought.

We have stuck by that rule ever since and accommodated the people we found to help us. And we learned a few things along the way about what to expect with a cleaning service.

Basically, there are three options for cleaning, other than doing it yourself: locating an individual through an advertisement or personal referral, a small private company, usually family owned, or a large national franchise company.

Our first experience was with an individual whom we inherited with our first home, a diminutive woman named Jean with an easy way about her. Through five years of service, we were more than employer and employee. She became a confidant and friend, as well as a caretaker when needed for our young daughter. We wept together the day Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and again on the day when we moved to upper Westchester and lost her in the process.

Our property in Westchester has both our living quarters and professional offices, so we upgraded--or so we thought--to a commercial cleaning service. Things were okay for a couple of years, but we could never be sure we would have the same cleaners from week to week. We like to trust people but, of course, checked that the service was insured. Then one week we experienced a jewelry missing, knowing

full well that no one else but the cleaners had been in the house when the items disappeared. We immediately discharged the service and began asking our neighbors if they knew of a single reliable person.

One was recommended highly: a young Polish woman who came to us 16 years ago and is still with us. She cleans very well, perhaps too well in that some of our varnished surfaces are showing some wear. Items have been broken through the years, but what never has been broken is our complete trust in her.

For the past few years, I've also known a wonderful small cleaning business, family owned, that has the contract with our offices at Coldwell Banker. Owned by Richie and Linda Russo, the company is Two Plus Three, the three in the name referring to their three grown children, Jude, Louis and

Roseanne, who sometimes help out.

"What you have to look for more than anything else is honesty and responsibility," said Richie Russo.

He has been cleaning private homes and businesses throughout Westchester for more than 35 years. If I didn't already have a trusted individual, I would use this family-owned business where you can connect directly with the owners who are actually doing the cleaning. Two Plus Three can be reached at 914-962-0129.

At the same time, if I wanted to feel really good about using a service, I'd go to a company like Maid Brigade (www.maidbrigade.com, 914-741-0552), a franchise operation that treats its employees

right, offering health benefits and a 401(k) plan. They may cost a few bucks more, but owner Gary Murphy, along with his wife, Robin, says that advantages also include a well-trained staff, educated by both classroom and practical sessions, and frequent refreshers by DVD.

Cleaners arrive in pairs in smart little cars and are supervised. Maid Brigade also prides itself on using all green cleaning products, so you'd be doing something good for yourself as well as the environment.

Here are the pricing comparisons. For an individual, it's usually \$20 per hour. Our cleaner spends four hours cleaning our house for \$80. A small family-run operation like Two Plus Three, spends three hours in an average-size house with two cleaners for \$125. Maid Brigade offers two people who spend two hours for \$140 to \$160 per visit. Our cleaner tells us that, with the economic downturn, some of her customers have moved from a weekly cleaning visit to every two weeks while Maid Brigade also reported some customers cutting back.

So, like many aspects of our lives in these times, while cleaning up, we're slowing down.

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