

A Bear wants a place that's *funky but high tech*. A Cub craves a 61-inch TV.
Susan Miner is there when her clients—athletes, executives, movie stars—need help settling into Chicago

Homework



IT'S 10 A.M. AND ALREADY SUSAN MINER IS GOING OVER her game plan. R. W. McQuarters, a cornerback for the Chicago Bears who has been renting on the North Shore, wants to buy a place in the city. So, on very short notice, Miner, a relocation consultant, will be showing him around town this afternoon.

"He says he wants something hip, different, a little funky," she says of her two-minute phone conversation with McQuarters. "In other words, he's looking for a bachelor pad," which Miner defines this way: "Very high tech, beautiful views, entertaining space, great kitchen. Of course, a Jacuzzi—that's a given. It's got to be a place that makes a statement. Off the top of my head, I can think of ten places to show him." She ticks them off: lofts in River North; penthouses on North Lake Shore Drive; some new and happening developments in the West

Loop. One place she is thinking of has a salt-water aquarium built into a wall; another has a balcony overlooking a breathtaking view of Lake Michigan.

Although Miner has yet to meet McQuarters—the call from him came just an hour ago—she is confident that she knows what this Bear will want and that she can find it. "Details will be important," she says. "That means things like granite, stainless steel, quality hardware." And then there are the special considerations. "His friends are Bears. We're talking about some big guys. Get a few of them together and the room fills up quickly. So he'll need a place with high ceilings and some wide open space." She pauses for a few seconds and you can almost hear her arranging the list of properties in her mind. When she speaks again, she sounds like a coach planning an afternoon scrimmage session. "I'll mix it up for him today."

WELCOME TO SUSIE'S WORLD, where it's always something. Either Tommy Lee Jones can't get his Jacuzzi to work or the wife of one of the presidents of a Fortune 500 company needs to see 200 homes before she can find the right place for their new life in Chicago. "You do what it takes," says Miner, a thirtysomething lawyer and real estate broker who created and runs Premier Relocation, Inc., a white glove settling-in service that specializes in the trials of corporate relocation and acclimation: short- and long-term leases, home buying, personalized services such as car registration, auto insurance, schooling considerations for the children, and introduc-

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tions to personal trainers and massage therapists. The requests the company gets for help range from the easy (Where is the Lincoln Park Zoo?) to the esoteric (One professional baseball player in town needed a bed with a control to change the firmness of the mattress. Miner found one in a day). She and her staff of four pride themselves on going the extra mile with their Hands-Off Home Set-Up Service. "Essentially, all you have to do is turn the key and walk in with your toothbrush," says Miner. "We've done everything else, like phone setup, cable service, and furnishings." Forget your toothbrush? No problem—Premier Relocation can take care of that, too.

A few weeks ago, Miner and her staff provided just such a Hands-Off service for Fred McGriff, the first baseman for the Chicago Cubs. The special-order 61-inch television was in place and hooked up to cable; new linens were on the bed. The next day, though, Miner got a call: McGriff was due at Wrigley Field. Could someone go grocery shopping for him? He needed peanut butter, jelly, bread, Gatorade, and chocolate chip cookies. It was all there when he got home.

Petite and blond, Miner is a dynamo with a penchant for racing through her days in high heels. Her favorite saying: "Never say, 'No, it can't be done.'" She grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and majored in marketing at Ohio State. Then she got a law degree and a master's in business there. A law firm she worked for in Ohio was once faced with evicting 16 people—some with special needs—from a boarding house. "I asked for 30 days to find them new places," she says. "I said I'd do it on my own time, but I just couldn't see putting them out on the street. And I found them all new places to live."

In 1995, she founded Premier Relocation as an outgrowth of her own less than satisfactory experience when she moved to Chicago to work for General Mills. She had wanted to live in the city, yet she found that the company wanted to book her into an apartment in the suburb of West Chicago. When she complained at work, the personnel department advised her to move to The Drake until she got acclimated and to send the bill to the company. A couple of months and a \$35,000 bill later, Miner found a place to rent in the city. By then, she had realized that there was a need for a complete relo-

cation service agency. "There were a lot of companies that could handle the acclimation process, helping with schools, needs like that. But when you are ready to do the real estate deal and buy a place, they farm you out to a broker. So you lose the continuity." No problem—Miner got her real estate license and started the company she once had needed.

At first, she concentrated on corporate relocations, helping transferred employees from companies such as IBM, the Avon Corporation, Amoco, Quaker Oats, Goldman Sachs, and General Mills settle into town. She developed a private list of properties that never make it to the general real estate brokers. "These are clients who spend three months in Aspen and a month in Phoenix, and they trust us to manage their property and do short-term rentals while they're gone," she says. She also included quality homes for sale.

"When I transferred here from Minneapolis, we needed both temporary housing and then a permanent home," says Stephen W. Lilienthal, an executive at CNA. "She got us into temporary housing and acclimated to Chicago very quickly. Then she and my wife spent the next three or four months looking for the perfect house." The end result: The Lilienthals bought two places, a house in North Barrington and a condo downtown. "Susie got us the best of both worlds."

In 1997, Miner received a call from the Illinois Film Office. "They said that Tommy Lee Jones, Wesley Snipes, and Robert Downey Jr. were coming to town in three days to shoot *U.S. Marshals* and they had no place to put them," she recalls. Within a week, she had them situated: Jones in a 5,500-square-foot loft with two huge decks (the owner was a trader spending a year in London); Snipes in a 2,200-square-foot penthouse; and Downey, who was traveling with more of an entourage, in a house on North Burling Street. "I did it easily," she says, "and so I had found my niche."

FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, MINER HAS BUILT A specialty handling actors who spend several weeks or months in town. When Teri Hatcher came here to appear in *Cabaret*, Miner's company settled her into a townhouse in a gated community in Old Town, and when Hatcher's nanny suddenly became ill, someone from Premier Relocation baby-sat while Hatcher took the

stage. When Sam Mendes, the director of *American Beauty*, was in town working on the movie *Road to Perdition*, he needed a multilingual VCR and other tech equipment so he could watch international tapes. "I went to Abt, spent \$5,000 in a snap, and got it delivered," Miner says. "Susie was great," says the actor Minnie Driver, who moved to Chicago temporarily to work on *Return to Me*. "She listened to everything I needed." Driver's request was for a place with a lot of light where her black Lab, Bubba, would be welcome, and with a guest area so her sister could visit. The result: Driver stayed in a loft near the East Bank Club. "She was tireless in searching for the right place for me," says Thomas Carter, the director of *Save the Last Dance*.

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"Our rentals range from \$3,000 to \$50,000 a month," Miner says. "So clients expect service." Miner's fees range from \$500 for renter location to \$1,000 for home-buying service. Her Hands-Off Home Set-Up costs from \$750 to \$1,000, plus any extra expenses incurred because of special requests. It seems clear that Miner must make her main money through real estate rental and sales commissions. "It's nice to get people settled into the right place," she says demurely.

With the film industry slowing down in Chicago lately, Miner has turned her attention to the sports teams in town. Already she is working with the Cubs, the Sox, and the Bears—and the Bulls have started calling, too. It feels like a natural fit: Players come and go, sometimes just for a season while keeping their home base in another state; even those who live in the area are often too busy with work to sort out their private lives. Like R. W. McQuarters and his search for a bachelor pad.

"Oh, he found the perfect place," Miner says a few weeks later. Discreet, she will reveal only that it is a loft in River North. "Very happening, very cool. Lots of limestone and special amenities. I think he's going to be very happy there." ■