



Concierge smoothes way for clients

Detail-oriented: Katherine Parris does tasks her clients have no time for. She'll organize a move or a party, or pick up dry cleaning.

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It's 10 on Wednesday morning in early March. A snowstorm is tying up traffic on Highway 401. But this doesn't stop Katherine Parris. She's on a mission: to buy eight dozen doughnuts at Krispy Kreme. Not for herself, mind you, but for her clients. Parris, 37, is a personal concierge. It is her job to do jobs that many of us don't have time to do. Need groceries? Done. A gift for that special someone? Got it covered. Relocating and need to find a new home? Parris will start scouting locations. Parris, a former image consultant who grew up in Markham, began her career as a concierge a couple of years ago. She loves her job. She beams with pleasure as she drives around the city, seeking out a venue for a conference, checking out a condo for an executive moving to Toronto, buying groceries for a client, and picking up tickets for a Caribbean cruise for eight that she has also planned. "I finally found a job I love," she says. "I don't even care when my clients call me. They can call me at 4 in the morning if they need me. I'm a people person. "I'm doing what I love. I bounce out of bed in the morning I'm so excited. "I just love people. I can find something good in everyone."

But her time doesn't come cheap: \$40 an hour or a retainer of \$2,000 a month for her personal concierge services. She prides herself on getting the job done, no matter how odd the request or service. She has bought gifts for a mistress or two and picked up a prescription or two for Viagra. And she even has had to run out and buy a jacket and tie for a client 45 minutes before he was to go on stage at the Junos, the Canadian music awards. Her most unusual requests include a Tarzan theme party for a 50th birthday. But the bulk of her work is with corporate executives who are relocating and need someone to arrange everything from a place to live to finding schools for their children.

Personal concierge services are a growing phenomenon in the United States and have started to take hold in Toronto as well, says Parris. "It is the wave of the future." The reason is simple: People do not have time to do things because they spend so much time working. She objects to only one thing about her choice in career: the perception that she is somehow like a doorman. "I am not a doorman," she says as she maneuvers her car down the highway to an industrial part of Mississauga to drop off a gift basket she put together at a client's request. She thinks of herself as part wife, part shopper, part executive assistant, part butler, part mom. She sees herself as a concierge in the grand tradition of the great hotels of Europe. Her cell phone interrupts her explanation. It's her assistant calling about a request to organize a trip to Niagara Falls for a group of business executives and their spouses. She also tells Parris about some hockey tickets that another client had asked her to get. She quickly deals with the call.

Next on her agenda: deliver groceries to a client's home and let in his personal chef with the week's meals. As she pulls up to an apartment in Forest Hill, she reveals only that her client is a teenager from Calgary attending school here. His mother has hired Parris to look after him. A personal concierge in Calgary referred the mother to Parris. Geddy, a tall, strapping kid, is at home when Parris arrives. The two trade jokes. Then as Parris unpacks his groceries, Geddy goes wild with the unrestrained joy of youth. He has found a package of sushi, which he tears through before he heads back to school. "Where would I be without you guys?" he says as he shuts the door. Parris picks up his dry cleaning and locks up after him. "I work like an agent," explains Parris. "My job is to find people. If you need a personal trainer, I find him. If you need a chef, I find him or her."

Her business has grown over the past two years and she now has one other full-time employee and close to 150 clients, many of them from the United States, she says. She looks upon many of them as good friends. And no detail is too small for her. Even something as simple as picking up a magazine commands her attention. A client wants to send a subscription to Shape magazine to her daughter in Vancouver. It is on Parris's list of things to do today. She'll find it, she says, by day's end. That's just the way she is. Her efforts are paid back in a kind of karmic-what-goes-around-comes-around-nice gal way.

Parris's last stop downtown this Wednesday is the Westin Harbour Castle to inspect some meeting and hotel rooms. Pleased with what she has seen, she'll return to her office to begin finalizing the meeting. As she rides the Westin elevator, a bellman notices Parris' shoe is untied. As he leaves, he bends down on one knee and gallantly ties up her shoe. Parris laughs, embarrassed by the attention, and thanks him as he leaves. "I'm a people magnet," she says later about the incident. "People always do stuff like that all the time. I'll be out for lunch with my assistant and someone will say hi and pay my bill. Odd things happen to me."

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