

Learning to purge

Professional organizers help clients cut through clutter

**BY LORRAINE ASH
DAILY RECORD**

Cheryl Ellis found herself building shelves in the supply closet in her home office in Madison last fall. At her side was professional organizer Linda McHale of Montville.

When she opens the door today she can tell with one gaze whether she is low on folders or needs staples.

"Before the new closet I had things in boxes piled on top of other boxes on top of other boxes," Ellis said. "Naturally, whatever I needed was always on the bottom of the bottom box."

That's not all Ellis achieved when she hired McHale's company, McOrganized! The black leather couch in Ellis's office is clear of piles of papers. Her new filing system is coded by color. To access household records, purged of old bills, she reaches to a drawer and never leaves her computer chair.

For the past 30 years, the 54-year-old Ellis has been used to efficiency. That's how long she excelled in the top echelon of the financial services industry. But 18 months ago she bought a franchise through Action International and started her own small business as a business coach.

"I've always wanted to do that," she said. But with the shift came the need to build a home office that worked like a Swiss clock, a new wardrobe, a new schedule. Acquiring things didn't do the trick. She needed organizing.

4,000 organizers

Ellis is typical of one segment of people who turn to professional organizers, whose field is burgeoning. There are almost 4,000 members of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), according to Barry Isaac, president. That's up from 1,000 members in 1998.

Their stock in trade: purging and ordering the overbought, over collected, time-wasting, money-sapping, stress-producing merchandise in home offices, closets, drawers, basements, garages, living rooms and bedrooms across the nation.

Consider these facts posted on the NAPO Web site:



WARREN WESTURA / SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD
Professional organizer Carla Boissonault of Morris Plains shows off the closet she transformed for her client, Thomas Vreeland of Flanders, an accountant. He said he was impressed when she measured the closet and returned with various blueprints showing what could be done with it.

Tips from local organizers To learn more

From Linda McHale, McOrganized!

- Before you buy any item, ask yourself: How does this purchase jibe with my goals? My closet? My bank account?
- Don't keep records you don't need if they're overflowing their space. See what time frames the Internal Revenue Service recommends at www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p552.pdf.

From Carla Boissonault, CDB Organized by Design

- Open the mail over a wastebasket and throw away what you don't need. File the rest in folders categorized by actions that need to be taken -- a bill to pay, a phone call to make.

From Richard Barbalato, Bee Organized

- Shop with a list. If you don't, you wind up with many items you do not need.
- Drive all your spending to one credit card, and don't spend what you don't have.

From Sandra Felton, Messies Anonymous

- Start organizing with the Mount Vernon Method. Label three boxes "Throw Away," "Give Away" and "Store." Go

- 80 percent of what is kept is never used.
- 80 percent of what is filed never gets looked at again.
- 23 percent of adults pay bills late because they cannot find them.

Some Americans are buried in stuff, but they just keep buying. The role of the professional organizer -- hired in North Jersey for \$65 to \$80 an hour -- is to stop the cycle, restore order and introduce joy to daily life.

How? That depends on the nature of the clutter. At work, experts say, are social and personal forces.

Ellis's situation, spanning her home office and some bedroom closets, was resolved in 15 three-hour sessions. Though it took a lot of shoulder-to-shoulder work, it was easier than other organizing contracts McHale has for one reason: Ellis is focused.

Consider her closets. She bought pinstripe suits to dress for her powerhouse career. So, too, her purging was goal-oriented: She now needs more casual clothing.

If Ellis found herself struggling to let go of some of her banking clothes, it was because she had paid so much for some and felt nostalgic about others.

McHale helped Ellis over those humps as, together, they separated her clothes into two closets -- one for in-season, everyday clothes and another for off-season and special-occasion clothes, including a few of those powerhouse suits still used for public presentations. Each closet is airy and neat, not jam-packed like they used to be.

No clothing went to waste. Most of the suits -- and 70 pairs of shoes -- went to Dress for Success in Madison.

"All Cheryl's stuff was in fantastic shape," McHale said, "and it will help women who are struggling to get nice clothes for starting jobs in the business world."

Cultural forces

But other clients are not as focused. Emotional buying, bargain buying and just plain mindless buying run rampant, organizers say.

"My clients tend to be very affluent," McHale said. "The people with disposable incomes who hire me also tend to be the people with buying problems. There are many scenarios. One is the lonely wife whose husband is a workaholic. She buys and buys out of boredom. Another is the stressed-out mother who shops as an escape, pushing her carriage down the aisles at a department store and spending \$100 a week there because she has no other outlet."

around the inside periphery of the house room by room, tossing various items in each box. Do this for one hour a day. For more details, visit <http://messies.com>

[/get_started/mt_vernon_method/](#)
From Eileen Kirna, Kirna Consulting

- Check references and make sure whatever organizer you hire is trustworthy. Remember, the organizer will be privy to important private paperwork, even bank account and credit card numbers.

--Compiled by Lorraine Ash

Looking for help reorganizing your whole house? Or just tweaking a filing system or redoing a closet? The following some Morris area resources to get you started:

Some Morris organizers

- Richard Barbalato, Bee Organized, Chatham Township, (914) 772-8361, b.drbee@patmedia.net
- Carla Boissonault, CDB Organized by Design, Morris Plains, (973) 993-4437, carlaannbo@aol.com
- Melanie DuBois, Considerate Done, Florham Park, (973) 255-8850, melanieh97@yahoo.com, www.ConsiderateDoneNJ.com
- Eileen Kirna, Kirna Consulting, Denville, (973) 586-3044, eileenkirna@kirnaconsulting.com, www.kirnaconsulting.com
- Linda McHale, McOrganized!, Montville, (973) 452-8403, Linda@mcorganized.com, www.mcorganized.com
- Nicole Pittaluga, Neatnikk Organizing Services, Chatham Township, (973) 701-9188, neatnikk@patmedia.net
- Lucinda Taterka, A Tall Order, Succasunna, (973) 219-6216, ctaterka@yahoo.com

Professional organizations

- National Association of Professional Organizers, www.napo.net
- National Association of Professional Organizers Northern New Jersey, www.naponnj.org
- Professional Organizers Web Ring (POWR), www.organizerswebring.com

Web addresses

- Balance & Beyond, www.balanceandbeyond.com
- Messies Anonymous, www.messies.com
- National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization, www.nsgcd.org

Select books

In the latter case, McHale may suggest the mother spend \$100 on exercise classes with free child care that will last her six months.

"Clutter is absolutely a phenomenon of affluence, and you don't even have to be rich," said professional organizer Richard Barbalato, of Bee Organized, based in Chatham Township. "We all live in affluence and we're just used to buying cool things we see. I love America. I love people, but they really need a little discipline.

"Say we're talking about a wealthy person who can buy whatever he wants whenever he wants. That's great. Do it. But purge it. Somebody out there can use your extra suitcase or your 20 extra picture frames or your 20 calculators. But if you have 20 of one thing, always have 20. If you have 21, give away one."

Stores that encourage bulk buying do not help the situation, especially in a culture accustomed to instant gratification, according to professional organizer Carla Boissonault of CDB Organized by Design, based in Morris Plains.

"In this age, the attitude is: I want this and I want this now," Boissonault said. "There is no more putting things on layaway. People just charge it. So people have too much stuff and it gets out of hand."

Americans try to use material things to fill gaps in their lives, according to Roxanne Friedenfels, who chairs the sociology department at Drew University and teaches a course on happiness.

"We think more stuff and more information is going to improve our lives but in fact we are no happier in the United States than we were 50 years ago," said Friedenfels, adding that research shows getting a new car brings people satisfaction for a couple of months.

"Then you adapt," she explained. "You want a better car."

Organizing purchases also may bring short-term happiness, she said, but it does not address the issue of tying happiness to the world of physical things.

Personal forces

Sandra Felton, who founded Messies Anonymous 25 years ago and is a member of NAPO, also believes that an organizer can be an invaluable aid but not an ultimate solution.

"To have the right help at the right time is a wonderful thing," she said, "but the person has got to change if the house is going to change."

A retired schoolteacher and former "messie," Felton says the issue can be confusing for "messies" because they often are capable and creative in other areas of their lives. In her messy days, she grew visually accustomed to disorder. She was overly sentimental and kept things as a way to subconsciously keep the past alive.

"Perfectionism is a great deal of the problem," Felton said. "We don't want to make a wrong decision and so frequently we decide not to make a decision. Among professional organizers there's a comment: Clutter is the result of many postponed decisions."

n"Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic," by John de Graaf
n"Authentic Happiness," by Martin Seligman, www.authentichappiness.com
n"The Complete Tightwad Gazette," by Amy Dacyczyn
n"Conquering Chronic Disorganization," by Judith Kolberg
n"How to Start a Home-Based Professional Organizing Business," by Dawn Noble (released January 2007)
n"Organizing Magic: 40 Days to a Well-Ordered Home and Life," by Sandra Felton
n"Your Money or Your Life," by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin
Messy Closet Contest
• Messy Closet Contest, January 2007. Winner gets a closet makeover, with time donated by members of the National Association of Professional Organizers Northern New Jersey. Information and registration form will be posted at www.naponnj.org. For more information, contact (866) 550-7263 or info@naponnj.org.
--Compiled by Lorraine Ash

So-called "messies" have a lot of thought processes to attack, she said, and they need to learn to think in a different way.

Sometimes messiness crosses into chronic disorganization, which is characterized by three factors described by Judith Kolberg, founder of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization. To qualify as chronic, disorganization must have persisted for a long time in spite of failed self-help efforts, likely will continue into the future without intervention, and undermines the quality of daily life.

Professional organizer Eileen Kirna, of Kirna Consulting, based in Denville, said her chronically disorganized clients tend to suffer with Adult Attention Deficit Disorder. Most of her clients are at a crossroads in life.

"They are coming back from a personal setback -- divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, finally being treated for depression or bipolar disorder, finally getting a diagnosis of Adult ADD," she said. "They are open to allowing individuals to help them along."

Next year the field of organizing will further mature as businesses continue hiring organizers in-house, according to Issac. Also, he said, NAPO will offer certification for organizers.

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