

APRIL 8, 2010

Law and Order: How a Pro Helps Tackle Clutter

By ANDREA PETERSEN and JENNIFER MERRITT

If you're aiming to organize a chaotic and cluttered home, the most dangerous place on earth may be the Container Store.

At least that is what some professional organizers say. That is because most people leave that Mecca of boxes, bins, shelves and hooks (The stores carry more than 50 different types of CD holders alone.) without much of a plan. Armed with good intentions and a host of shiny new products, they often end up with just as much of a jumble. And even more stuff.



The closet of Laura Leist, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers

"It is the biggest mistake people make," says Laura Leist, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers or NAPO, a trade group. "They think if they buy something to put their things in that is going to solve the problem." (A Container Store spokeswoman says store employees—who receive more than 240 hours of training on storage and organization—can guide customers into making the right decisions about products.)

The most important part of organizing is actually throwing stuff away or "purging," Ms. Leist says. And that is where professional organizers say they can often be the most help, by gently and tactfully encouraging people to get rid of superfluous stuff.

We've all seen magazines showing freakishly organized homes: closets with precision-stacked linens; alphabetized spices; orderly toy cubbies and designated bill-paying stations. Glossy shots like these inspired four lifelong pack rats to get organized—with a little help.

Professional organizers were asked to tackle everything from a home-office overloaded with piles of paper to a closet stuffed to the ceiling with a mélange of baby clothes (the kids are teenagers), school artwork and even an old mattress and box spring. Testers in varied living situations—from a two-story

house in the Atlanta suburbs to a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y.—were enlisted to hire organizers in our hometowns.

In general, we were thrilled with the outcome and were amazed at how quickly we saw results. Forced to justify what we wanted to keep, we were able to be much more ruthless in our purging. (Though, one of our testers did resort to hiding some purge-worthy note cards from her organizer's eyes.) Our organizers kept us focused and on task, and definitely got their hands dirty, digging into the depths of closets and lugging bags of trash. So **we were able to avoid what Ms. Leist says is the second biggest de-cluttering mistake: getting distracted and tackling multiple projects at once, never making much headway in any.** All this hand-holding didn't come cheap. Our organizers charged between \$75 and \$100 an hour (for a two-person team). We also ended up shelling out more money—one tester spent \$400—for new storage items that our organizers recommended, but the experts we worked with were sensitive to our budget concerns. Two of our organizers came to our homes for an initial consult and then returned for the actual organizing—an approach that seemed to yield the best results.

Anyone can call himself or herself a professional organizer, though those with the designation of "Certified Professional Organizer" have passed an exam and have a minimum of 1,250 to 1,500 hours of hands-on work with clients. All of the organizers we worked with belonged to NAPO (Organizers are searchable by zip code at napo.net.) We also checked references from previous clients.

In Brooklyn, we found Amanda Wiss of Urban Clarity through word of mouth. We wanted help with an entryway cluttered with shoes, coats, newspapers and baby gear and two front closets that were packed so tightly we could barely open the doors. After an initial consult, Ms. Wiss sent us an email with a shopping list of low-cost storage items to buy from the Container Store (A great place when you have a plan.) When she returned for four hours of actual organizing, Ms. Wiss had us take everything out of the closets and put items into four piles: one for trash, one for things we wanted to donate or sell, one for storage and one for items we'd keep in the apartment.

'Delayed Decision-Making'

She had a terrific solution for our biggest eyesore: the mounds of paper, books and other clutter that marred our beautiful six-foot-long dining room table (and often barely left us enough room to fit two dinner plates.) She had us buy an attractive "in-box" for the day's newspaper and mail and create a "project" shelf in one of our nearby bookcases to house the magazines we were saving to peruse later, travel books for an upcoming trip to Italy and novels we're reading. "Clutter is just delayed decision-making," she says. And the best part is that we've been able to maintain the systems she put in place: Weeks after her visit, we're still clutter free ... relatively.

In Los Angeles, we hired Regina Lark of A Clear Path to tackle a room in a four-bedroom house that does double duty as a home office and guest room. Ms. Lark, who has a doctorate in history, started off by asking, "What's driving you crazy?" While she had us sorting through and purging the mounds of paper on and in our desks, Ms. Lark went through a closet stuffed with photo albums, stationery and office supplies. She had some novel ideas for how to deal with the deluge of memorabilia a family of four had acquired, including a poster the 13-year-old twins had made: Instead of letting it take up space in the

closet, we should "take a picture of it and put it on your desk," she says. She also recommended that we "Keep one thing that is representative of a time period, like a picture or letter," instead of several mementos that will just collect dust and create clutter.

In Manhattan, we wanted help setting up after a move to a new, bigger apartment. We settled on In Order to Succeed because the company specializes in relocations. When Robin Reid Hunt arrived for a four-hour session she toured our seven-room apartment and immediately went to work making suggestions; adding hooks in the hallway for coats (so we could reform our prior habit of tossing coats on dining-room chairs) and a second rod for the closet in the children's room to expand room for clothes. Then we tackled our biggest issue: the kids' toys. Here is where we wish we'd had a consultation first—and the opportunity to buy some new storage items before Ms. Reid Hunt did the actual organizing. The organizer did dive in and help us purge and categorize toys, but we knew we needed to buy a new, bigger storage unit.

We did end up buying something similar to what was recommended after our session, but by then we were on our own to do the final set up.

In Atlanta, we needed serious help. A deep basement closet was packed with baby clothes, lamps, mounds of memorabilia from a decade living in Moscow, including nesting dolls and old newspapers, a mattress and even a papasan chair wedged up near the ceiling. Another closet was stuffed with files, luggage, pet food, cases of canned tomatoes and more old newspapers. We knew we had some serious editing to do. One of the best things about the company we hired, Chaos 2 Comfort, was that it recycles or donates purged items for you. Our two-person team was very sensitive to our feelings, suggesting we take a break when we felt overwhelmed and advising us to keep those items that had real sentimental value. In the end, we had five garbage bags full of clothes and toys for our organizers, Susan Fox and Teresa Taylor, to take to a local homeless shelter.

But that night we panicked: In our zeal, we had accidentally tossed the blue sweat suit one of the kids had lived in as a toddler—and we wanted it back. So we sheepishly called Ms. Taylor. Thankfully, the items hadn't been donated yet.

—Miriam Jordan, Betsy McKay and Judy Dixon contributed to this article.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved