

hoarding school

Professional organizers
encounter all types—from busy suburbanites with
no time to de-clutter to serious hoarders



BEFORE Robin and Bruce Henoch's storage area

By Julie Beaman / Photos by Hilary Schwab

A team of three home organizers arrives at 10 a.m. to work their magic in the basement storage area of Robin and Bruce Henoch's Potomac home. The job will take about six hours, including a sweep through the tricycle-strewn garage at the end of the day.

The storage area is located off the newly renovated family room; it's the black hole into which everything was sucked during the construction. Six months later, it's an obstacle course of stuff, everything from toddler toys (no toddlers left

in this family) to appliances to paint cans. The organizers—Jane Choi of Gaithersburg, Jessica Wood of Bel Air and Jenny Sefcheck of Alexandria, Va.—are not intimidated. Most jobs average three to five rooms worth of work, so this one is relatively easy. It doesn't seem that way to Robin Henoch, however. With two young kids and a job four days a week, Henoch knew she wasn't going to be able to tackle that storage area. "It's hard enough to keep up with the everyday clutter," she says.

A professional organizer's

goal is to first get rid of the clutter and mess, then organize the space in a way so that the client can easily maintain it. Choi, Wood and Sefcheck will sort things into categories (infant/toddler, memorabilia, home renovation, etc.), then evaluate and arrange possessions and storage possibilities for clients, set up filing or storage systems and teach organizational techniques.

A wide range of clients contact professional organizers, from busy people, like the Henochs, with a runaway basement to the serious hoarder.

"There's a name for it," says Betsy Fein of Rockville, president of Clutterbusters!, the Rockville-based company where all three organizers work. "It's called 'Compulsive Hoarding Disorder.'" She and the three organizers who are tackling the Henochs' basement storage room are familiar with the type. Choi recalls organizing a 45-foot recreational vehicle belonging to a woman who actually had to be hos-



the TEAM (l.-r.) Jessica Wood, Jenny Sefcheck, Betsy Fein, president of Clutterbusters Franchising, Inc., and Jan Choi

pitalized for asthma caused by living with too much clutter. She called from the hospital requesting a SWAT team of organizers to complete the job before she was discharged, as she had been warned by her doctors not to go back to her home until it was de-cluttered.

"Hoarders will get to the point where they have so much stuff everywhere they

can't sleep in their beds, use their kitchen or go to the bathroom," Choi says. This is as severe as it sounds: Fein and her staff have had clients who've improvised by sleeping on sofas, eating every meal out, and in one case, using the toilet and shower facilities at a nearby public pool.

Sometimes, a disorganized person can slip into hoarding mode as a result of

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some personal crisis. Fein and Wood (who has been organizing for a year and a half) still shake their heads over their most afflicted client yet, an older woman who had lost her son. No one visited her apartment for 12 years, including her surviving son, who always saw her in his home where she seemed fine, frequently cooking dinner for him and his family (though her own kitchen had been inaccessible for years).

Flooding in her apartment finally forced him over there and, according to Fein, he was shocked by what he saw. He called for help and moved his mother out; it took eight organizers five days—120 hours—to make her two-room apartment habitable. “Everything was moldy,” Wood recalls. “We found her deceased son’s birth certificate, which had been lost for years, and major jewelry.” They also found five unopened boxes of artificial Christmas trees. “She was so upset by what we were doing,” Fein says, “her

son had to physically remove her from the apartment.”

This case was extreme, but according to the organizers at the Henochs’, there are many more surprising stories out there, including the one about an elderly woman who called because her husband had newspapers piled to the ceiling. She literally couldn’t breathe with all the dust the papers collected. “He refused to move anything,” Fein says in some amazement. “We would take things out of the house and he would run after us and bring it all back in.”

Apparently, writers are major culprits when it comes to hoarding. “We have lots of writers who have paper issues,” Fein says. “They never want to throw any papers out, and for some reason they often keep them in the kitchen. A whole kitchen can be filled with papers, the most inappropriate place for them.”

Another common storage place is the shower stall, because it’s a place where

drawing the curtain can hide a multitude of messes. Fein remembers a client whose bathroom looked fine—until you opened the shower stall and saw rolls of paper towels piled up to the ceiling. This kind of compulsive collecting is typical hoarding behavior; hoarders often purchase things in duplicate or worse, like the client with the five Christmas trees. Multiple, unopened DVD players, for example, are not unusual. Wood says, “I’ll often find new, beautiful storage bins next to piles of junk. Clients just can’t figure out how to get started.”

Feeling overwhelmed is the reason many people end up turning to a professional in the first place. “Almost everybody uses the word ‘overwhelmed’ when they call,” Choi says. Many clients continue to hire an organizer on a regular basis to maintain whatever order the organizer has achieved; Choi has one client who needs 12 hours of organizational maintenance every month. Clients

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quickly develop relationships with particular organizers who become familiar with their needs; they'll ask for those organizers specifically. "Clients get attached even after one day," says Sefcheck. "I even get hugs."

Some hoarding stories have happy—and surprising—endings. Wood once found a box of "very fancy, high-end china that the owner hadn't even remembered she had. In the same house I found a dusty leather ledger full of meticulous household accounts dating from 1901. I left it on the coffee table."

At the Henochs' home, the basement storage area is done: A wide expanse of neatly swept cement floor is bordered by shelving; its contents organized into common-sense sections—home improvement, luggage, arts and crafts. A big pile of trash sits out by the curb and mountains of household items are ready for donation, including those toddler toys. The organizers will call and get it all taken away.



AFTER A triumphant Robin Henoch in her storage area

"Clients are so grateful for the difference we can make," Fein says. "It's like a weight is lifted off people when we're done." As for Henoch, her now-pristine storage area barely resembles the chaos of six hours earlier. "But if it gets to the

point where I can't get in the door again," she says, "I'll probably be calling." **B**

Chevy Chase writer Julie Beaman frequently writes for Bethesda Magazine on home topics.

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