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Section: HomeFinder

Wendy Thomas, Cutting the Clutter columnist

Reclaiming a Room *City woman transforms hodgepodge basement*

"Our basement family room, as you can see, is a mess. It has become a 'catch all' for everything! Every few years we attempt to organize it but somehow the clutter fairies manage to find it again!" wrote Leni Hodgins in response to The Telegraph's call for entries in its Cutting the Clutter Contest. "I have saved my daughter's artwork since she was old enough to hold a crayon. Some of it hangs on the walls. Recently, my ex-husband died and my daughter and I cleaned out his apartment. Most of the items were donated to a local church but some things of sentimental value we couldn't throw away," she continued. "We need help!"

Hodgins was chosen for The Telegraph's Cutting the Clutter Contest. Sue West of Space4U in Amherst and I showed up at her Nashua house on a sunny Thursday afternoon to help her begin the process of decluttering. The first floor of Hodgins' house is immaculate. There is no clutter anywhere, and she even apologized for the newspaper that was left out on the kitchen counter.

Hmm, I thought, maybe we had made a mistake picking her as the winner. But when we got to her basement, however, I knew that no mistake had been made. Everything that didn't fit upstairs had been put downstairs, items from households from three people that had died over the years were crammed into corners, and clothes, clothes, clothes were everywhere.

It was too daunting of a task to go through it all, Hodgins told us, as West and I perched ourselves on the arms of the couches, the only places where we could sit. Hodgins gets up early to run and then goes to her full-time job. The last thing she wanted to do when she got home at night was to sort and pick through the stuff. So things just sort of sat.

What she wanted was a recreation room where her children and grandchildren could watch TV and play games, instead of the storage area the room had become. Hodgins wanted to reclaim the living space that had slowly been lost through the years.

West started by gently asking questions about the reasons why the clutter was being stored. She quickly discovered that Hodgins had two thoughts about the stuff:

** "I can't throw it away, but I also don't have a use for it."

** "Once the stuff is put down in the basement, out of sight is out of mind, and I don't have to think about it."

West - who is a believer that you don't have to get rid of everything, just the stuff that is not important to you - assured Hodgins that she could keep her favorite things. Suggestions such as a memory box of some favorites from people who have died and folders for artwork and photos helped assure Hodgins that she was not going to lose anything she really cherished.

Organizing items into like piles starting in one corner of the room and working counterclockwise, West constantly asked the question: "When was the last time you used this?" She followed Hodgins' answer with the advice, "And if you find you're not using it, get rid of it."

In just one hour's time, Hodgins was able to remove enough clutter to fill her car and drop off donations after work. A significant dent had been made. After getting Hodgins started on making decisions to get rid of her accumulated stuff, West gave her the following tips to keep her on the right track:

- ** Try setting aside time, even a half-hour at a time, to keep going.
- ** Start visualizing lounging on the couches comfortably reading or watching TV. Don't worry if you can't "see it" right away; sometimes it takes clearing the entire room before you can see the new room.
- ** Work methodically, so you can see a lot of progress quickly.
- ** Make piles of items that go to the same new place; the opposite is to carry one item upstairs at a time. The risk is that you might find something upstairs that requires your attention, and you'd never get back that day to your new den.
- ** Send clothing off to The Salvation Army.
- ** Box up games, and bring them to Nashua Children's Home, a boys and girls club or a local school.
- ** Save artwork in an art portfolio/folder, or choose a few to frame as memories and keep either in this space or in her room. There are "school folio" binders that are good to keep artwork in, too.
- ** Any wrapping or holiday supplies go into the second basement room. It's the perfect place to store and use these materials.
- ** When the comforter/blankets bin is empty, we decided this basket would be good to hold things destined for The Salvation Army. When the basket's full, make a trip. It's also good to have another "orange bin" near your clothes closet and one in the laundry room - or the storage area of that part of the lower level.
- ** Running clothes: Questions to ask yourself as you try them on: How do they fit? Are they comfortable as you run? When was the last time you wore the item? Are repairs needed?

After one week, West and I returned Hodgins' house to help finish decluttering the room. She understood that things not used did not need to be stored in her house, and she also felt very good about donating things for others to use. She continued getting advice from West about the remaining clutter, such as outdated videos (get rid of them especially since she didn't have a VHS player anymore), outdated or non-fitting athletic clothing (donate) and a large air conditioner (store elsewhere).

Hodgins also removed a lot of furniture that she didn't like that was just taking up space and a large basket that, instead of effectively storing items, instead hid the things at the bottom so well that you didn't know what was there.

When we left after that second visit, it was clear Hodgins was well on her way to transforming the room. She understood her previous attachments to many of the items' memories, and she was OK about releasing many of those memories.

A few days later, a triumphant Hodgins sent this final update on her progress: "The basement is completely decluttered! I also started to declutter the unfinished half of the basement and the back office, too. I have made numerous trips to the Upper Room Ministries this week. I am finding it much easier to rid myself of stuff. This afternoon, one of my friends will come over and help me hang pictures and/or shop for new ones. Sunday and Monday, some friends will come over and help paint the walls in the basement!

"It looks like a totally new room. I must admit, when I went to Home Depot to pick out the paint, I went into the storage-container aisle and almost started hyperventilating! I was so excited! I want to organize everything now! "When this project started, I really never thought I'd want to spend much time in that room, even after it is decluttered, but it is starting to look so great, I think I will claim it for my own!"

AFTER DECLUTTERING

Sue West of Space4U in Amherst (www.organizenh.com or 765-9267) gave Hodgins the following pointer on things to do once the room was decluttered:

- Generally clean the room, vacuum, dust and tighten up the couch covers.
- Do necessary little things, such as buy the ceiling light cover, get some small curtains for the window for color, and hang a few pictures you already have.

- Look around your house and see if there are "accessories" you're using in a room upstairs that you could put downstairs. This gets some favorites into a new space you have to use and warming it up for yourself.
- What you want to do, at a minimum, is make the room warm, comfortable and to your liking. Make it a room, not a place to put things you're not sure of. By making it comfortable and warm, you will be more likely to use the room to relax. Make a point of spending time there. Try reading your paper there in the morning or at night with your coffee. Try going through mail, reading or using the weights. Use it in some way you wanted to use it, so that it begins to become part of your everyday living space.

Illustration: Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom



Hodgins' basement was previously the place where other people's "stuff" went.

Courtesy photo



Leni Hodgins' basement in her Nashua home can now be a room for her children and grandchildren to play games - or perhaps it can be a room for herself.

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