



Organizing Articles, Newsletters and Tips

Free Information from Space4U

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CUTTING THE CLUTTER

Books, toys used to create chaos in space

The Telegraph (Nashua, NH) September 2, 2005

written by Wendy Thomas, Telegraph Correspondent

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a monthly series about decluttering.

Over the years, I have tried various methods for decluttering my living room. I would get the room reasonably clean for a few days, but then, by spontaneous clutter-combustion, it would go back to being the chaotic mess it seemed to prefer.

I contacted Sue West of Space4U in Amherst, who bravely answered my call for help. West's philosophy of organizing is that it is a sharing of expertise.

"You're the one who recognized a need," she said.

"You're the one who knows a lot about how your family operates, you know what you'd like to see for the space and you know how things go on a day-to-day basis.

West sat down with me and asked me to think about how I wanted to use the room and then think about what was getting in the way of using the room in that manner. Some questions she asked me were:

- What's working? What do you like about the room itself, such as the layout, how you and your family use it?
- What's not working?
- How do you want to use the room?
- How do you think stuff accumulates and by whom?

Initially, I went overboard. I decided I wanted a grownup living room devoid of all traces of children. I also wanted to get all the books out of the living room and move them to better storage places in the house. What was getting in the way of my vision were the books, magazines, toys and "things" that had accumulated over the years.

"Hold on to that vision, but be ready to modify it as the room evolves," West advised. She told me that the first step was to do an initial sort of everything in the room. I had to sort everything into one of the following categories:



Organize Your Space and Time

- Stay in the room.
- Trash or recycle.
- Belongs somewhere else in the house.
- Give away.
- Not mine.
- To repair.

I dutifully pulled everything off shelves and out of drawers and for days sat in the middle of the room in a pile up to my chest while I made decisions about every single thing. I had to decide if keeping the item chest while I made decisions about every single thing. I had to decide if keeping the item was worth the cost of having it somewhere in the room.



After several days of sorting, sorting, sorting, it's amazing how much easier it became. If not keeping something meant I did not have to find a place for it in the room, then that was as good a reason as any to toss it.

Once sorted, I had to deliver the items to their locations: Trash went outside, donations were sealed in a black plastic bag (so I couldn't see them and change my mind) and then delivered to the nearest drop-off site, and items were delivered to other rooms.

"You do not want to stop your work in one room to make a place for items in another room," West said. "For now, just drop them off in that room, and you can deal with them later."

Tired of the furniture I'd had since before I was married, I went to the local furniture stores and looked at new living room sets. I know that the point of this exercise was to declutter and not redecorate, but in my vision of a new fantasy living room, I saw all new furniture in it. After all, if I was going to declutter, I was going to do this right, and my final living room was not only going to be decluttered, but also it was going to be beautiful.

But you know what? A funny thing happened on my way to decluttering. I found that things I had originally thought would be leaving stayed but took on new roles. For example, we had a nature table filled with stones, shells and other natural oddities. I had thought all those knickknacks would get the ax, but then I realized I like to look at rocks and shells. They made me happy, and so I compromised by creating an artistic small arrangement of nature items in a blown glass dish.

Some things I had thought would stay ended up going. A lot of my memory items went into this pile. But I decided I could take a digital picture of the item, look at that and still have the same warm and fuzzy feeling I would have had looking at the real thing.

Some specific problem areas that were addressed include:

- Mantel. We had used the mantel as a place to put items out of reach of our children. The more children we had, the higher the piles grew. The kids have gotten older and, for the most part, understand they are not supposed to put small toy parts up their noses. I cleared out the toys and broken bits and reclaimed the space as mine.
- Books. Books are my friends. I can easily read two to three books a week. At first, I did not want to have any bookshelves in the new living room, but this was not

practical. My solution was to sort through the books I had and allowed myself one small shelf on which to keep my birding books and novels in my reading queue. The rest of my books were moved to bookshelves upstairs.

- Magazines. Instead of piles of magazines, I now have a basket for only the current issues. If a new one has come in and I haven't read the old one, then one of them gets tossed. Once the basket is full, I either have to clear it out or no magazines go in. One small exception to this is that I have a lot of cooking magazines that I could not bear to toss out without looking through them first. As a compromise, I allocated a small shelf to hold the magazines until I get can to them.
- Toys. With the exception of board games that are stored away after use, there are no more toys in the living room. None. Not a one. And it's going to stay that way.
- Kids' items. All were moved to their rooms, including ribbons won, art projects and rocks shaped like hearts.
- Knickknacks. Let's face it, I love little things. Although I did get rid of a lot, I kept quite a few. Maybe down the road I'll get rid of more, but for now I can live with what I have. Decluttering does not mean you have to get rid of things you love.
- Furniture. After I found out I liked what we had, I rearranged the furniture to go more with the flow of how I wanted the room to be used.
I did have a large wrought-iron baker's table that, although very grand and ornate, was not doing much other than holding hats and junk. I decided to move it out of the living room and replaced it with an antique dresser we had, which now holds board games and scrapbook materials.
I also had a chair that needed to be re-caned and one that needed to be re-upholstered. Having this done has been on my to-do list for 10 years. It was time to make the decision to either fix them or throw them away. I called someone and will be getting them fixed.
- Fireplace screen. Our old fireplace screen was one of those tri-fold screens. It had come with the house, and we never had any need to replace it. It's great for holding Christmas stockings but during the rest of the year, it cuts off about 9 inches of room space by jutting out so far. The solution was to get a flat fireplace screen -- I have one on order -- and bring up the old tri-fold only during the holiday season.

West knows how difficult decluttering can be physically and emotionally, and she checked in every few days with me to offer encouragement and advice.

"Use the success of one area, whether it is a corner or an entire room, to get you motivated to do another area," West said. "It takes a lot of work to declutter, and you should be proud of what you've accomplished."

After a month of working, sorting and moving, I have the living room I always wanted. True to West's words, it did evolve from my initial "austere grownup" room to a more relaxed, kid-tolerant area. In order to maintain all the work I've done, we also have a new rule in our house. I have my children treat our new living room as if it were a national forest: "Whatever you bring it, you have to take out."



LOST, NOW FOUND

Treasures found and removed from our living room:

- \$115.63, including a \$10 gift card to Target and a \$100 Savings Bond.
- Tax information from 1986, including every receipt.
- A library book that was due in January.
- A spider web I have watched grow all summer because I couldn't reach it.
- A Christmas gift I forgot to give a friend in 2004.
- Five designer purses I have never used.
- 33 highway tokens.
- 18 pairs of sunglasses.
- 254 pounds of books.
- 48 pounds of magazines.
- 18 pounds of trash.
- 82 pounds of donations.
- 432 total pounds removed from the living room.

KEEP OR TOSS?

Sue West of Space4U (603 765-9267 or www.OrganizeNH.com) says the following questions can help you on your way:

- Why do I keep this?
- Would I take it if we moved?
- Do I love it? Does anyone else?
- Do I have a definite use for it? When did I use it last?
- If it's broken, is it worth fixing?
- Who else would like this?
- How many of these do I have?
- Am I tired of seeing it or moving it around?
- Is it more important to keep the item or to take back the space it's taking up?
- Is there a better place for it?
- Can't decide yet? Put it in the "later" pile.

Next month

In the next installment of Cutting the Clutter, I'll be tidying up the foyer. I also plan to report on my progress with the living room.

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