

Sat. May 3, 2008

'Messy-Jessie' gets help with her clutter

Professional organizer triumphs when others fail to sift through chaos and disorder

David Hayes

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Jessica Penney studies Chinese medicine, paints, practises yoga, does long-distance running and is co-owner, with her mother, of Absolute Beauty, a spa on Bayview Ave. near Eglinton, where she spends her working days doing facials. Oh, and when she was a child her family nicknamed her "Messy-Jessie."

Until recently, her apartment was such a mess that she never invited over co-workers, friends or dates. She'd never had her parents over, either. Today, sitting in her neat and tidy 650-square-foot one-bedroom, about a 10-minute walk from the spa, it's hard to imagine the picture of utter chaos and disorder she's describing.

"I'm a girl who, when going out, would try on 10 different outfits with all kinds of accessories and never clean up later," says Penney, an outgoing 28-year-old who bears a resemblance to the young Sheryl Crow. "I would just open the linen cupboard, throw something in and quickly close it. Stuff for my art projects was all over the apartment."

Organizers - ranging from well-intentioned friends to cleaners who dabbled at it - had come over but Penney had defeated them all. Finally, her mother dispatched a friend, Deanne Kelleher, to help her daughter. The goal? "To make it look like a girl lives here," Penney says, "not a bunch of frat boys."

Kelleher, who owns Kaos Group, worked in the beauty industry for years before she turned a childhood passion for organizing - "my sisters remember me always rearranging the furniture" - into a business.

Renters pose a special challenge. They tend to move a lot so every space-saving solution has to be portable. Major renovations are out and even bolting a bracket into a wall is usually not possible. Aside from that, the process is the same for homeowners, tenants or businesses.

"Organizing almost always starts with paper," Kelleher explains. "It's what makes people mental first. We all have a huge amount of it coming week after week but only a small percentage of it goes out again. So, I start by asking, what sort of paperwork comes home? What do you do with it? How much of this paper do you need to keep? Then, I explain that it's going to be kinda hellish and you're probably going to feel incredible fatigue after each session."

Nodding, Penney adds: "It was emotionally draining. When I agreed to it, I was skeptical and scared. I felt ashamed, too, because I'm a girl and girls are supposed

to be organized and good at making a beautiful home. I felt like this is something I should be able to control myself but I had no clue."

The key to a good organizer is listening and not imposing personal taste on a client. Penney, for example, loves things to be open-concept so she can see them. So, where Kelleher's first impulse was to suggest a closed cabinet for the home entertainment equipment, like she has in her own home, she knew Penney wanted to be able to see all her DVDs and videos. So Kelleher created a space for her favourites right under the TV, and the rest are in IKEA baskets tucked under the bookshelves in the living room.

"It's all about asking the right questions," says Kelleher, "and, more importantly, listening to the answers. When you remove the ego - this is what I would do - everything is all right."

Beyond paper, it's all about identifying the superfluous - the psych textbook from third year we liked so much, the pans accumulated to make a special dinner for a party six years ago that are never used but cost too much to discard.

In a large cupboard in Penney's kitchen, there is an assortment of clear plastic drawers and boxes - the kind of products available at IKEA and Canadian Tire or specialty shops like Solutions (a chain in the GTA) and Space Solutions (with stores at Bayview and Eglinton and on Avenue Rd. near Wilson Ave.). Everything is marked and has its place.

But doing this comes toward the end of the process. Home organizing products are part of a \$6-billion industry in North America, in part because neatness is both an obsession and an elusive ambition.

"People buy stuff long before they know what's going to go in them or where they're going to go," Kelleher says. "So, they end up with the wrong size or wrong design. Pretty soon, the organizing products are part of the clutter."

The guilt and shame associated with a messy home can be overwhelming. I won't describe to you what my home office looks like, but I regularly gaze in despair around me and wonder how I'll ever get it organized. For an antidote, I read *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder*, co-written by a business school professor and a journalist. In it, they argue that many disorganized people are "more efficient, more resilient, more creative and in general more effective than highly organized ones."

Even Kelleher would agree there may be truth to this, in some cases, but for many of us, our messy lives get in the way of contentment.

Penney, a very satisfied client, says: "I used to hate it when my dad said: 'Everything has its place.' But he was right. Now, I feel more powerful and in control of my life."

David Hayes is an author and award-winning feature writer who has been a renter most of his life.

*If you have stories or information to share about renting, contact David at lifelong_renter@sympatico.ca
Toronto Star*