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Everything in its place

Students get organized and find some lost pens

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Photos by JOSH HAWKINS/Staff Photographer
Joheeny Pluivouse gets organizing help from Whitney Hengstebeck.

In case the memo was buried beneath all the clutter on your desk, Jan. 12 was "National Clean Off Your Desk Day."

To mark the occasion, the fourth-graders at Philip Rogers Elementary School at 7345 N. Washtenaw were visited by Chaos to Order, a company that specializes in organizing homes and offices.

The students in Courtney Price's class were treated to a lesson in proper desk organizing. Monica Friel, founder of Chaos to Order, asked the students why it was important to have things clean and organized.

"I have my cat's litter box in my room," said Lauren Matzig, 9. She explains that her dog likes to scoop the litter out onto the floor. "So sometimes when I walk in there I slip on the litter and it's a mess."

Friel told the students that the average office worker spends 6 weeks of the year looking for misplaced papers.

"Why do you call it 'Chaos to Order?'" Lauren asked.

"Because when a place is messy, there's a whole lot of chaos," Friel said. "Do you know what 'chaos' means?"

"Yes," the students answered, with a few "no's" interspersed.

"Chaos is clutter," Friel said. "And we bring it to order. That's how it works."

The students were asked to remove everything from their desks. Within minutes, two of the fourth-graders, Jai Patwal, 10, and Cao Nguyen Vu, 9, have amassed a sizeable collection of effects, both personal and academic.

"I don't even recognize this book," Jai said, displaying a paperback. Sitting on top of his notebook are two identical pairs of scissors; one from last year, and the other from this year.

Cao Nguyen, or "Win" as his classmates call him, produces a green recorder from his desk. "We're supposed to keep these in the music room," he said.

"Win is the messiest kid in class," declared Jai.

"I don't have any time," Win said, adding that he doesn't even have time to do his homework.

"I sleep in and leave late for school every day," he stated proudly. Win complained that he does all the work



Vicky Thompson works with Samiya Zamon and Malik McCoy on organizing their desks at his house. His cousin, who lives with his family, just eats and sleeps all day.

"Jai is a little pack rat," Price said. "He's known for having his entire desk filled with things, with paper piled on top, and then it expands to other desks around him."

Jai confessed that he is pretty messy. "I have the habit of putting my work in the corner instead of back in the desk," he says, producing what looks like a plastic marble from his pocket after his teacher left. He rolled the toy across his desk.

"It's a Bakugan," Jai explained. The toy sprang open up to reveal a miniature figure that looks like an aardvark wearing protective armor.

"They're like Pokémon," Win said, "but they don't come out of a ball. They are the ball."

Once everyone is finished organizing, Ms. Friel sprays and wipes down the desks.

"Mmmm," Jai said, smiling, "that smells good and lemony."

"They weren't very messy," Friel said. "I was surprised." She says that she visited a school earlier that day in Park Ridge, where the students' desks were much more disorganized. "I guess the less space you have, the less you accumulate."

Across the hall in Vera Neyman's class, Chaos to Order helped the students organize their lockers.

"We don't have those toys," said Brianna Pelissier, 9, regarding Bakugan. She says that it's more of a boy thing, and the teachers don't allow it.

Chaos to Order organizing expert Whitney Hengstebeck helped Brianna spruce up her space.

"Her locker is already organized," Hengstebeck said, "it's the backpack we need to clean up."

"I find all my stuff when I clean out my backpack," Brianna said. "There's too many books in here - hey, I found my pen."

After taking out her books and folders, Brianna dumped the contents of her backpack into a trash can. She salvaged a scrap of paper. "This is a poem I took from a magazine last year," she said.

Selena Elia's locker is filled to capacity. Her backpack and lunch box are both adorned with images of Hannah Montana, the television alter-ego of teen pop superstar Miley Cyrus.

"I've been a fan since the beginning," Selena said.

Waniya Jamal, 9, said that Montana's popularity is waning. "I like the Jonas Brothers more," she disclosed. Her classmates fervently echo this sentiment. Many of them have Jonas Brother's merchandise, including T-shirts, backpacks and pencil cases.

Guadalupe Rangel, 10, says that her sister signs all her email, "Mrs. Jonas."

Friel said that she would like to visit Rogers Elementary again next year. "I think they really appreciated it," she said. "Next year I might open it up and do more."

Back in Price's class, the students agreed that it was a worthwhile exercise.

"I'm happy to have my desk clean," said Jai, "and I'm happy to meet new people, too."

"I'm just happy this is over," Win said.