

By Judy Buchenot

I was working on my usual mountain of laundry and halflistening to WGN's Kathy and Judy radio program when I heard something about a messy desk. My mind quickly flashed to my own frustrating work-at-home office. For years, I had been stuck in a corner of our family room to do my writing. Legos and GI Joe guys often hid in my files and my desk was frequently used as a

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*'Usually, a person only refers back to 15% of their files and if there is a lot of stuff, there is a chance you won't be able to find what you are looking for.'*

— Pat Braun

### *Organizing consultant*

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snack table, game board and paint easel. I looked forward to the day when I could move out of the play dough and match box cars into my own space.

The day finally arrived eight months ago when we finished an addition to our home. I moved into a little corner all my own, determined to get organized. But then, baby number five came early. School started. Then there was the Halloween room party, Cub Scout achievements, church education meeting, a science project, conferences. Every time I had an hour to work, I had to write or complete some other "due tomorrow" project. I simply had no time to get organized.

Pretty soon, I had boxes of stuff: School stuff, bill stuff, income tax stuff, column stuff, newspaper stuff, church stuff and miscellaneous stuff. Spending precious time searching through this stuff to find the right

stuff was frustrating.

My own lack of organization made it easy for me to relate to the radio program. When Kathy and Judy finished discussing their own messy desk frustrations, they introduced Thalia Poulos of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). Thalia announced a contest sponsored by NAPO to find the owner of the messiest desk. The winner would receive two hours of free organizational consultation from a team of Chicago professional organizers. I paused from sorting socks and wrote the address on a piece of cardboard from a detergent box.

Visually, my desk didn't look messy. I had cleverly hidden the mess in boxes and files in a cabinet. I sent in a picture of my empty office area but included an elaborate explanation of the frustration of being disorganized.

A few weeks later I learned that I had won the contest. A team of three professional organizers would be sent to my home to make sense of all my stuff. Initially, I panicked. Would these high-tech, non-nonsense city dwellers understand the lifestyle of a work-at-home mother of five? How would they react to finding room mother game plans, vacation bible school registration forms and children's report cards all mixed in with my job-related items? I was tempted to forget the whole thing, but decided to take the challenge anyway.

Before they arrived they faxed me lists of suggested basic supplies — envelopes, ruler, scissors, paper punch and such — and other very specific filing supplies — hanging file folders, expandable accordion files, manila file folders, file cabinet, box bottom folders and vertical sorters. I had some of the items and spent about \$25 on additional items.

On the designated Saturday, three women arrived at my home toting large bags

and wearing friendly smiles. Time was not wasted on chit-chat. We went right to the office where they took off their coats and described the game plan. Patricia Braun, president of Braun Strategic Resources, would work with me on task management. Thalia Poulos, president of Time Planners Inc. would sort through my existing files in search of order. Monica Thompson of Chaos To Order would examine my office arrangement to suggest changes and additions for greater efficiency.

We went to work. Monica began to quiz me about how I planned my projects, where I answered the phone and basically, how I coped. As we went along, she made suggestions. We had only been working for about 10 minutes when 3-year-old Tyler waltzed into the office wrapped in a blanket and carrying a large bunch of bananas. He was singing in a shrill voice, "Who wants ba-

nanas? I have bananas for yooooooooou!"

I cringed, but the three organizing women smiled and waited while I sent Tyler back to his daddy. We continued working but I was more relaxed because I realized that these women were not allergic to children.

In fact, the three were very tolerant of all my personal ways. As we worked, I realized they were there to organize and help, not judge or criticize. With that spirit, we made significant progress.

Although much of their advice was customized for my situation, some of their suggestions may work for others. One concept is to determine which items should go into "live files." I had tried to maintain files in a cabinet but often wasn't able to get the items into the cabinet before I needed to use them again. Pat suggested creating "live files" which consist of accordion files for frequently used items.

We labeled each 3 1/2" wide accordion folder with a major category. For example, I have one labeled "Foxtales" for my weekly column, one for current features, one for future features and one for church. Within these files are inexpensive manila folders labeled with subdivisions. In my column file, I have five dated folders where I can place items for future columns as I receive them. In the feature files, I have a folder for each feature I am working on. In my church folder, I have a folder for each area of responsibility. There is one for Sunday school, one for the senior group, one for Easter activities, etc. Making sufficient subdivisions is important. At a price of less than \$3 for 100 manila file folders, it's not costly to be organized.

These accordion files are placed in a super sorter, a plastic vertical holder, which is placed on a shelf. All three

women were adamant about using vertical rather than horizontal sorters. "There is always a bottom of a pile in a horizontal system," explained Thalia. "Things get lost and forgotten on the bottom of a pile."

This system is an improvement over placing all these items into general file folders in a cabinet. I can quickly locate a specific area to file something since I have several subdivisions easily in sight. I can pull out a single folder to work on a single story. I can pull out a single folder to take to a committee meeting in a specific area or take the whole file for a general meeting.

My file cabinet was reworked to provide space for items which I refer to less frequently. Insurance papers, tax information and other items were grouped in hanging folders. Some of my hanging files were replaced with box-bottom folders. I had never seen these wider bottom folders which neatly accommodate a large number of items. Again, some general headings were subdivided into smaller groups using manila file folders.

As a visual person, Pat said she likes to color code everything within her files. She chose a color for a subject and uses colored folders and accordion files for organizing all materials. The colored items are more expensive but are ideal for people with several main project areas.

She also suggested taking all the organization directories of phone numbers and addresses and placing them in one binder. I punched holes in the single sheets and booklets alike and now have one location for my lists of PTA board members, scout leaders, school directories, church directory, etc. Pat pointed out that a Rolodex wasn't the ideal organizational method for me since



(Photo by Jim Cleary)

tion is cleared out and a

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Continued from Page 16

many of my contacts change yearly and some people may only be called once or twice a year. "Putting all the names in the Rolodex would take a long time and chances are you would never remember their name to look it up in the Rolodex anyway," she said.

Monica tactfully pointed out that my file cabinet was basically "cheap" as are many home office file cabinets. The problem with a cheap cabinet is that it is not deep enough and the drawers only extend out about halfway. Files in the back are difficult to reach. In a better file cabinet, drawers extend completely so that even the last file is visible. The gliding system is also inferior on less expensive cabinets.

"If you have to fight to open the drawer, you won't use the file," warned Monica. Since my budget didn't allow for a new cabinet, Monica suggested keeping the files loose so they are easier to reach.

Items like past tax records should be stored in boxes. Keeping these items in the file cabinet takes up precious space.

Space is a problem in every office and purging regularly is a way to gain space. Pat suggested purging files once every two years. The criteria for what stays and what goes will vary but a basic rule is anything older than two years should be removed. "Things change so rapidly," explained Pat. "If things are computer related, health related or time dated, after two years, they are outdated. Usually, a person only refers back to about 15% of their files and if there is a lot of stuff, there is a chance you won't be able to find what you are looking for."

The only exception to the two-year rule are tax records which Pat suggests keeping for seven years.

When purging, be sure to

reorganize. Sometimes files need to be divided or consolidated depending on changing work situations. The process goes quickly if you set criteria for saving things before you open the file.

When it comes to organizing time, the process can be complicated. It is easy to visualize file folders but project management is more abstract. Pat proposed using some manner of visual time planner to help organize projects. One method involves using a graph. Projects are listed vertically and the horizontal grid is labeled by weeks. Make a slash during the weeks when a project must be started, worked on and completed. When a project is complete, darken the area.

A calendar book is also a help. Thalia recommended Franklin Time Planners. Pat liked a smaller plan book. The basic advice from both was to get a calendar and plan book and take 10 minutes each day to update it and review what is ahead.

Monica had some suggestions on how to rearrange my office. Since we had a larger counter top available, she advised switching to the deeper space. She recommended moving the file cabinet to my left hand side.

Some of the advice seemed like common sense. But knowing what to do and doing it are two different actions. Thalia said she has regular clients whom she visits periodically to help them stay organized. Other clients stay organized once a system is set up. Hopefully, I will be able to be one of those organized-for-life people.

After I finish this story, I will blacken out the project space in my graph. I will wheel over to my live files and place the notes in the NAPO folder. Finally, I have a plan for control and it feels great.