

# Chicago Tribune

Your Place Section 8

## Neatness counts

Penchant for organizing grows into tidy business

By Annemarie Mannion

**T**he buzz of an unexpected visitor at the door turns some people into whirling dervishes. But not Monica Thompson, a 26-year-old entrepreneur who has turned an inclination for organization into a new business.

When others are rushing breathlessly about, gathering the clutter of their lives and stuffing it out of sight--under the bed, into a drawer or into the deep, dark recess of a closet--Thompson is cool and collected.

In her North Lake Shore Drive condominium, everything is orderly and in a place that makes functional sense.

"I'm ultra-organized. I've always been this way," says Thompson.

To prove her claim, she opens her closets and drawers without hesitation. Items are neatly placed, stacked, folded or otherwise ordered. In the cabinet beneath the bathroom sink, cosmetics she uses often are in front, while those she needs rarely are kept in the back.

Thompson's business is aptly called "Chaos To Order." Since starting it in October of 1991, she has discovered that people are willing to pay her between \$40 and \$60 an hour to think about such seemingly simple matters as how to organize that space between the bathroom sink so that it is workable and orderly.

The hourly cost of the job depends on its complexity. Simple sorting would be less costly than installing new shelves, for example. Clients are also charged for any racks or containers that Thompson

purchases for them.

Thompson's penchant for putting any hodgepodge into order goes back to her childhood. While growing up in Chicago's Norwood Park community, she could not resist an organizational challenge, she says.

"I used to take our garage apart at home, tear it up and put it all back together. I would not stop until everything was in its place, until everything was perfect." Thompson says. "I en-

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joyed finding ways to fit everything into little spaces."

Many people long for a streamlined experience, devoid of disarray and jumble. But many feel they do not have the time, the inclination or the ability to attain it, even though, according to Thompson, being organized has many emotional benefits, too.

"A lot of people feel stress because they are disorganized. Being orderly puts you at ease, it reduces stress. You save time looking for things. It's a psychological thing. It's sort of a relief," she says.

### Easy does it

Heidi Bess, one of Thompson's clients, has seen how Thompson uses simple strategies and everyday tools to improve her organization.

In the laundry room, Bess says that Thompson "put my Bounce on a paper towel holder. It's so easy, but I wouldn't have thought of it."

Bess' problem is common: She keeps just about everything.

"I'm a terrible saver, but Monica makes me throw things out," Bess says. "If I haven't worn something in the last six months, she tells me to get rid of it."

Thompson's philosophy is that "if you haven't worn it for a whole season, give it to someone who will use it."

Bess also finds that she is easily sidetracked when she tries on her own to put order into her things.

"I'll start going through things, but maybe I'll run across an old letter or something and I'll think, 'Well, I should give that friend a call.'"

Coming across an old photograph, a letter or other memento that brings back an old memory often stops people from continuing the sorting and organizing that they had, with all good intentions, started, says Thompson.

"I work a lot faster because I'm not emotionally attached to their things," she says. "Sometimes it's emotionally

draining for people to sort through their things. But his is my business and I treat it differently."

### Working order

Thompson's goal for commercial artist William Gould, owner of Design Advertising in Chicago, was to make his work area as functional as possible. Because Gould had already put considerable thought into how his work space should be organized, it was one of her more challenging jobs.

"It wasn't like walking into the home of someone who is disorganized, where there is just so much to do that you just know immediately where to start," she says.

She found, however, that she could improve upon his setup. "I installed shelves that created space for him. I arranged things to make them more accessible," Thompson says.

Because Gould's office is in his condominium and he has to use a lot of colored markers, pencils, layout paper

and illustration boards in his package-design work, space is at a premium.

"She just carried my organization a step further," he says. "Sometimes when you're in the midst of something, your mind isn't focused on what could be done." Thompson looked at his needs and then shopped around to buy racks and shelving for him, a task he never had time to perform.

Thompson has forged a business in a relatively new industry. She is one of only 15 members of the newly formed Chicago chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), which was founded in 1985.

### Neat ideas

Now she is selling apartment leasing agents, moving companies, real estate agents and others on the idea of paying her to provide services to their clients free-of-charge.

Michelle Edwards, a leasing consultant at a 344-unit apartment building at 1212 S. Michigan Ave., says she is

considering offering Thompson's organizational services as an incentive to renters who renew their leases.

"People who have been in an apartment for a year or maybe three years have accumulated things, and it would be nice to have someone organize it. It would give a whole new look to their apartments," Edwards says.

Thompson tries to give her clients tips that will help them stay on the straight and narrow path to orderliness. If they're in a rush in the morning, for instance, she suggests they collect clutter in some type of container and put the items away later.

While she calls her own organizational style "immaculate," Thompson says she does not impose her stringent standards on others.

"Everyone has their own organizational style," she says. "The key is to make sure that you're organized so that it works for you."



Photo for the Tribune by Matt Marton

Organizer Monica Thompson puts a client's closet in order.

## CHAOS TO ORDER



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