

As Seen In

# Homes

of Distinction

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[ PRACTICAL MATTERS ]

## TAKING ON CLUTTER - AND WINNING

HOW TO GET IT ALL TOGETHER (AND REMEMBER WHERE YOU PUT IT!)

By *BERNADETTE STARZEE*

**L**ee Munch describes her 13-year-old daughter, Amy, as artistic in nature. Correspondingly, her daughter's bedroom has always been "a disaster and a challenge," Munch said.

Over the years, the Munches' kitchen grew similarly disorganized, with "10 pairs of tongs in the drawers and bills and school notices thrown on the counters or the island," Munch noted.

The East Setauket family decided it was time to get professional help, hiring an organization company to help them get both rooms under control. Stony Brook-based To The Next Level helped the family streamline its kitchen by, among many other things, placing papers in different-colored, labeled folders.

"Everything is now put into its place, and we know what's



*CLEAN YOUR ROOM! Start small, the experts say.*

where," said Munch, who owns a business coaching firm called Action International of Long Island.

But the biggest benefit came in Amy's bedroom, where To The

Next Level owner Eileen Koff worked side-by-side with the girl. "Eileen was not emotionally attached to Amy, so it wasn't like it was her mom screaming at her to clean her room," said Munch. "They went through everything

together, and my daughter made the decisions about where everything would go, so she took ownership of it. They mainly used shelves and containers that were already in place. The room now looks empty, and my daughter is very happy with it."

For many people, the hardest part about getting organized is getting started. "One of the biggest reasons people don't want to deal with clutter is that they're overwhelmed by it," said Barry Izsak, president of the Austin, Texas-based National Association of Professional Organizers. "They don't know where to start." Izsak suggested breaking the job into "small, manageable pieces."

"Make the easy decisions first, on things that you don't have emotional ties to," he said. "Like what to do with the broken VCR, the 10-year-old stacks of National Geographic or the five-year-old printer that made its way out to the garage."

Then move onto other, more difficult decisions. "When deciding what to get rid of, ask yourself some questions, like 'When was the last time I used it? Do I have enough space to

keep it?' and 'Could I get it again?'" Izsak said. "My favorite question is 'What's the worst thing that's going to happen if I get rid of it?' If you can live with the answer, get rid of it."

The jobs that professional organizers take on are not "one-size-fits-all," said Koff. "Depending on your need for a professional organizer, it could last 12 hours or 150 hours. It depends on how deep you want to go. You can do a makeover, like you see on 30-minute TV programs, in which the homeowner has no say. Or the professional can work side-by-side with the homeowner, transferring organizing skills as they work."

Professional organizers can recommend the latest products that are available for getting organized. "But first you have to make a plan," Koff noted. "You have to do a sort, then a purge, and then decide where to put the items you're going to keep."

"There are many steps you have to take before purchasing organization items," she added. "People go out and buy products they think they need without doing the planning,

and they wind up wasting money."

An example of an organizational product she may recommend, said Koff, is expandable shelving for the pantry, which puts things in stadium-style seating position, so you can see what's in the back.

Koff said it's typical to start a job by tackling the kitchen. "When you have the kitchen under control, it's easy to get the rest of your house, and life, under control," she said. "The kitchen is where life happens. It's where the phone is, where you put messages, where the mail gets dropped and where the kids come after school."

According to Izsak, professional organizers typically charge between \$65 and \$125 an hour. The initial consultation at your home may or may not be free, depending on the organizer.

Whether you go with a professional or do it yourself, remember that Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was your stash of belongings. "You can't tackle 20 years of clutter in a day," Izsak said. "You didn't get into this situation in a day, and you won't get out of it in a day."