

# The Oregonian

## To get rid of the biggest piles of junk, many are seeking professional help

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Clutter is a hallmark of American society. If you can't find happiness in a panoply of possessions, where might it exist?

Across the country, a multi-billion-dollar industry has sprouted around the clutter stuffed in drawers, garages, on nightstands and in closets. According to the International Housewares Association, Americans spent roughly than \$1.2 billion on closet and storage organizers in 2002, up 10.4 percent from 1997. Americans even watch other people's clutter on television. On TLC's "Clean Sweep," HGTV's "Mission Organization" and the Style Network's "Clean House," hoardaholics are given help ditching their trinkets.

Portland stands testament to the stuff trend.

Real estate agents, remodelers and architects around town say that today, young couples are generally requesting bigger homes with more storage space than past generations. The Oregon branch of the National Association of Professional Organizers grew by 50 percent over the past year to 30 total members, called expert organizers. Westside Portland's 1-800-Got-Junk, which earns about \$276 per junk removal job, posted revenues of \$273,000 over the past year and expects that total to grow to \$400,000 for the fiscal year ending June 1, 2005.

"The catch phrase is decluttering," said Tom Maryschak, who runs the westside Got Junk franchise. "But people have a big problem with letting things go. . . . Portlanders have found an incredible way of using things to the nth degree. We've been picking up chairs that are like toothpicks."

Portland junk haulers said they regularly pick up rickety dryers, vintage refrigerators, sleeper sofas, VCRs, exercise equipment and lawn decor.

Roughly 35 percent of Maryschak's business comes from repeat customers. He'll sometimes return to a house after a few months to find clutter piled up in the same spot where he once carted off old junk.

Not that Maryschak can point fingers.

He still has a pair of yet-to-be-used water skis from one job. "I don't have a boat," he said, "but if I ever get a boat, I've got my water skis."

Maryschak and Portland's east franchise partner Alan Pietrovito agreed that there is a higher furniture turnover rate in Portland's west side than east of the Willamette River.

"In the east side there's the older stuff, antique stuff, stuff that people want to keep," Pietrovito said. "They don't just dispose of things to get new stuff."

On the east side, Pietrovito has had to train himself to work with clients who sometimes agonize and pour their hearts out to him as he hauls away memorabilia, whether they recently ended a relationship or a loved one passed away.

It's tough, said Pietrovito, who is a collector. "You can't really rush someone through that, and yet you really want to get on with the job." He recently pulled workers off a job where the house was rife with hypodermic needles. Other jobs have yielded a WWII Japanese bayonet -- which he kept -- and stereo consoles, two which he kept, others which he forced himself to give away, recycle or pitch.

"Simplicity in life is a good thing," Pietrovito said. "I don't have a knack for it."

Saying goodbye -- whether to garden gnomes, the old hose, Pez dispensers or newspapers -- is never simple.

"There's the monetary as well as emotional attachment," said Carol Keller, who founded Hillsboro's Organizing Experts in 2000. People are busy, she added, they don't have time to tidy up and take stock. And then there's that lingering concern, something Keller called the "I might need this someday" syndrome.

When the push to cut clutter becomes too tough, storage usually moves in.

People stop worrying that they own too many things to ever touch, and instead start corralling treasures into curio cabinets, third-car garages, sheds out back, "bonus rooms," redesigned attics, garage cabinets and cubbies. Yes, builders report an ever-growing interest in cubbies.

"It's his little cubby and her little cubby. . . it's the mud room, the mud bench," said Jim Feild, a remodeler with Progressive Builders Northwest in Portland, who added that "clients want to take advantage of every single void and nook."

From the Container Store to Hold Everything, packing stuff away is considered integral to a tidy existence. Magazines from Martha Stewart Living to Oprah propose streamlining your life, with the underlying message that to accomplish this, you have to purchase more stuff.

Keller, who is the president of the Oregon chapter of national organizers, and Anne Blumer, who founded SolutionsForYou in Portland, said that Oregonians tend to hoard paper including junk mail, old bills, magazines, catalogues, and their kids' old homework

and artwork. They added that clients often struggle with letting go of old books and clothes -- items with a price attached to them.

Part of the paper problem, according to Keller, stems from Portlanders' penchant for recycling.

"They want to do the right thing," said Keller, "but the recycling doesn't go out the door every week. It's part of the problem rather than the solution."

Expert organizers -- who charge between \$50 and \$125 per hour nationwide -- first meet for a consultation and later sort what should be stored, donated, pitched or recycled. Jobs can last anywhere from a few hours to more than a year.

Children are among the more difficult clients.

"I'll say, 'Do you need to have 25 Barbie dolls, or can you play with you five favorites?'" Blumer said. No big surprise that, as Keller said, kids usually say they need them all.

Portlander Maggie Kean said she took her children, ages 2 and 4, out of the house as Blumer sorted through their toys and pitched the plastic animals that come with fast-food meals or the knickknacks with missing pieces.

Blumer also helped Kean overhaul what she called the "mother of all messes" in her office along with the family room and toy room.

Sometimes clutter collects because of a major life event such as a baby's birth, a loved one's death or a car accident. Other times a disease such as depression, attention-deficit disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder can lead to clutter. Many times, Blumer and Keller said, people are just too busy to tackle the mess.

"I took a self-test, and I have trouble being really focused on certain types of things -- namely organizing my house," said Kean. "There's that frustration that comes with looking for something when you can't find it. It's kind of embarrassing."

Kean is not alone.

Hundreds of applications pour into clean-up reality TV shows every day. Hosts tour the country giving motivational speeches about decluttering. Keller said the National Association of Professional Organizers has grown by 40 percent nationwide. How did Kean feel as she watched her cluttered home transform into usable space? Much like all of those guests on reality TV.

"It blew my mind," she said. It made her feel like she could tidy up and actually make progress every night, she said, because the task was no longer insurmountable.

For Blumer, it was like "watching a caterpillar turn into a butterfly."