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Photo for the Tribune by Steve Lasker

Vicky Thompson, a professional organizer with Chaos to Order, helps Arthur Segil sort through paperwork in his home office.

One small step for mankind in keeping a house in order

By Chuck Green
Special to the Tribune

Arthur Segil used to be scared to death of the IRS.

"At tax time, when the accountant called me, I'd try to find a cubby hole to hide in," said the Highland Park resident.

But it's not what it might sound like.

The problem was clutter. When the taxman knocked, Segil couldn't find his files to save, well, Uncle Sam.

Today, it's a different story. "I just reach in and take them out," he said.

Easy as that—with a little help. To overcome the chaos, and in the name of domestic harmony, Segil

contacted a professional organizer to help make sense of the balance sheet that was his life. However, he concedes that whipping his possessions into shape, much less turning to a professional organizer, went against his true nature.

"I'm a born pack rat. I think all these things are terribly significant to—God knows whom? Certainly not history," he said with a laugh.

Segil's clutter isn't exactly history; he requires occasional repeat visits from his professional organizer. But his wife, Hush, remembers what things used to be like at home and appreciates the progress her husband has made.

"I think he was worried he'd

die under a pile. It was everywhere: his drawers in the bedroom, under the beds, the closets. We're having [the organizer] come again, because somehow, he can't control himself."

But at least he tries.

Jim O'Connor, a professional organizer and the only male member of the Chicago chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, recently completed a declutter project for a woman—unbeknownst to her husband.

"I spent over 30 hours over a four-day period. And her husband didn't know I was in the house. She told him, but she put everything we accomplished in writing, because husbands come

home and see everything is orderly, and they say, 'what was the big deal?'" he said.

It is a big deal in the home of Carmen and Tammie Trombetta of Wheaton.

How big a deal?

"Can a Dumpster come?" asked Tammie.

Her husband, though, uses memories as the motive for what he's accumulated, which includes his high school essays.

"He tells me, 'Do you know how long I've had this?'" said Tammie, who said she has largely waved the white flag. "I've given up. I just try to steer clear of the area. I don't think he even notices

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CLUTTER: An uphill battle for pack rats

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how frustrated I am."

Not so, said Carmen, who offers a logical excuse for the clutter:

"A lot of things get thrown away, but my life is my pictures and videotapes, and I have mounds of slides. We bought this nice, big house, and when we first moved in, I kept getting moved all around it. Now I live in a space that's about 8 foot by 12 foot, with 50 years of my life stuffed in it."

OK, so how about a professional organizer to help him work more efficiently within the cramped quarters?

"No way," he said.

He's even had the book thrown at him—by someone other than his wife.

"I went on a book tour, and there was a guest who wrote a book on organizing. She gave me a copy. I read it, but I never got around to implementing the philosophy," he said.

Lately, his wife has been going by her own book, and, with a neighbor's help, has gotten sly.

"I'm getting braver: I think if someone throw out some of your stuff, you wouldn't notice. So I've already started doing that. The sad thing is, I have to be careful because he goes through the garbage and pulls things out. So now a neighbor of mine comes out and picks up the bags and puts them in her garbage. He doesn't know it, but for me, it's a freeing feeling."

The perceived feeling of autonomy influences some men to resist dealing with clutter, according to Sara Yogev, a clinical psychologist with practices in Skokie and Chicago. She specializes in helping individuals and couples in short- and long-term therapy.

"When some men are told to get rid of things or pick up after themselves, it's like a burden to them; they feel as if they're being controlled," she said.

They must find a middle ground, she said.

"A man has to understand the psychological meaning of whatever item he's leaving out and how she takes it. And it's impor-



Photo for the Tribune by Steve Lasker

Hush Segil (left) observes as her husband, Arthur, and organizer Vicky Thompson tackle the paperwork in his home office.

tant for her to understand the psychological meaning that he's attached to something," she said. "The perceived notion of your spouse doing his fair share of housework and child care has a great impact on marital satisfaction. When you perceive he's doing less than his fair share, marital satisfaction is much lower than when it's perceived he's doing his fair share, or even more."

"Usually, whenever people get down to the psychological meaning, they can find a way around it. I don't think it's a woman's job to convince him of how he needs to change. It's a matter of mutual responsibility."

'The mom factor'

There's also the mom factor, she said.

"From a man's point of view, very often, it's an element of rebelling against the mom. Moms are usually the ones who nag. No kids like it," she said. "For women, being the keeper of the house is part of the culturally accepted role. That's why women don't rebel against it as much as men do."

But no matter how frustrating the situation might become, "don't nag," said Monica Friel, owner of Chicago-based Chaos To Order, which specializes in home and office organizing.

"Sometimes people who clutter just don't see it like an orga-

nized person does, and nagging can cause more tension than it would be just to pick it up yourself. A person has to be a willing participant in the organizing," she said.

Not that clutter is inevitable among men. For example, Mark Goldenberg of Chicago cringes at the thought of an unorganized home.

"I'm usually a pretty neat person. I think one reason is because I'm in a job where I have to juggle a lot of balls at one time. I think that kind of translates well to how I manage everything at home," he said. "As a kid, I had to have my room neat, and my sister and I always helped around house. So I guess whatever our parents told us as kids translated well to adult habits."

Goldenberg thinks that, in the long run, less clutter means less work. And all it takes, he said, is a little time allocation.

"It feels better and is easier to maintain a nice household, because that's less work," he said. "My fiancé and I concentrate on spending a few minutes a day putting things away and making the bed, straightening up before we leave for work. That's less stuff we have to worry about when we get home. The more that mounts up, the more you have to worry about it later. I guess I'm marrying someone like me."

But his fiancé actually takes it

one step further, Goldenberg said.

"I've always been a neat person, but I don't know if I've necessarily been a clean person," he said. "So she's kind of a clean freak, too, like dusting, vacuuming and cleaning countertops. I think we have a good meeting of the minds. Maybe not initially, because she had certain way of doing things, and so did I. But I think we have the same objective, so it's kind of easy for two of us to coordinate one project."

Andrea Spencer's objective was to reform her husband, Derrick, whom, like Trombetta, admits he's a pack rat. But it's an uphill battle.

"I hate to throw things away because you never know what you're going to need. You put things in one area and pile them up. I think clutter saves time," he said.

His wife endures his habits for a while, then . . . boom!

"I'm able to slowly break her spirits down until she kind of accepts things, then all of a sudden, she'll just explode and tell me it's time to clean up. I'm the kind of guy, it will be three in the morning, and all of a sudden, I'll want to clean house because I can't take it anymore," he said.

So a professional organizer is a possibility?

"No. I don't want people going through my stuff," he said. "Besides, it sounds too much like work."