

# Style Magazine

February 2002

## Conquering Clutter

By Kay MacIntosh

*With a pro like Kathy Trezise leading the charge, anyone can find her way to the organized life.*

The voice mail went like this:

*"Hi Kay, this is Katherine Trezise from Absolutely Organized. It's Wednesday morning, about five after nine. We had a meeting scheduled this morning at 8:30 at Stone Mill Bakery. I waited as long as I could, but I have to get to another appointment now. I hope everything is all right."*

Well everything was just fine, except I'd failed to look at the calendar in my little black organizer book that morning and was thinking, for sure, that our appointment was *Thursday* morning.

Which is just one of the many reasons I knew I needed someone like Kathy Trezise in my life. Parts of her marketing brochure seemed to speak to me and me alone: "Disorganization wastes your time because you spend time:

- looking for things
- missing appointments or being late
- not focusing on the most important things."

"Disorganization costs you money:

- Paying late fees and finance charges because you forgot to pay the bills
- Buying things you don't need."

One piece of the literature struck me at my very core: "Just looking at clutter saps your emotional energy. It can lead you to feeling more overwhelmed. Clutter increases feelings of fatigue and being out of control."

Absolutely Organized appeared to be the answer to all my problems – the un-balanced checkbook, the messy kitchen cabinets and the disappearing kitchen counter, the boxes full of old photos, the towering stacks of catalogs and magazines, the thank-you notes never sent, the frantic deadlines barely met...

WHEN I CATCH UP WITH KATHY AGAIN, I apologize profusely and we set a date for a home appraisal the following Friday morning. I promise to email her a description of my organizing goals ahead of time, which I never do.

She pulls into my driveway at 8 a.m. on the dot and is soon conducting a walk-through of our worst spaces. In the unfinished basement, she makes note of the dozens of storage bins full of old family photos and keepsakes, a decade's worth of discarded kids' toys, plus furniture from former houses and enough Christmas decorations to fill the back of a pickup. The kitchen cabinets have evolved into a hodge-podge of utensils and cookware and still hold spices and corn meal purchased during the Reagan Administration. The counters are stacked with catalogs, newsletters, invitations, kid drawings,

etc. Almost every surface of the master bedrooms holds a messy stack of notebooks and books and magazines and Ritz Photo boxes and old letters, all awaiting the mythical perfect weekend when I will get it all organized.

Wearing khakis and a polo shirt embroidered with her business logo, Kathy works quietly, making notes and occasionally asking a question about whether or how something gets used. Afterward, at the kitchen table, as we discuss what I hope to accomplish, she listens patiently, smiling empathetically, interjecting with a tip or a bit of solace in her soft, measured voice, and I begin to see her not as a businesswoman with a service to offer, but as a compassionate minister who not only preaches the gospel of getting organized, but lives it. I am ready to be her disciple, to cast away the sins of the old me – procrastination, indecision, tardiness and last-minute perfectionism – and become ... Absolutely Organized.

We agree on six goals, just for starters: Reorganize and de-clutter the kitchen and breakfast room. Organize family photographs into albums. Clean and organize the garage. Create a play area in the basement for the boys. Create a home office corner in the den. And make all bedrooms functional, uncluttered and restful.

By the time Kathy leaves, I feel like I have a new best friend. OK, a friend who charges by the hour. “It’s sort of like a personal trainer,” she says. “It helps to have the commitment of an appointment and the accountability.”

Kathy started her business several years ago when a friend asked her a simple question: What do you love to do? With a psychology degree from Western Maryland College and an MBA from Loyola, she had already done everything from helping manage a Toys R Us to running the Maryland chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers. In every job, and with every volunteer project she undertook for her church, her kids’ schools and her daughter’s Girl Scout troop, the part she most enjoyed was organizing projects and seeing them through to completion. I’m looking forward to being her next project.

NINE DAYS LATER, KATHY RETURNS toting five bags of organizing accessories from Bed, Bath & Beyond and a five-page plan that, in keeping with the Mother of All Organizing Principles, breaks each goal into small, doable steps. I will study the overall plan later. Today is the day we will conquer goal #1, to de-clutter and reorganize the kitchen/breakfast room.

Kathy gets right to it. She brings in four medium cardboard boxes and labels them: “Trash,” “Sell,” “Donate” and “Store Elsewhere.” Little yellow Post-it notes go up on every drawer and cabinet door, assigning zones for what should go where in the new order. “Measuring utensils,” “Small appliances,” “Food,” “Baking tools,” ...

I start on the top shelf of the pantry and work my way through 15 years of liquor and liqueurs – unopened Bailey’s, multiple Gran Marniers, and a blueberry cordial no doubt required by some Silver Palate recipe a decade ago. We agree that – especially with teenagers in my future – the inaccessible cabinet above the refrigerator will be a good place for the bottles we just can’t bear to toss, no matter how unlikely it is their contents will ever be consumed.

Once everything is removed from the pantry shelves, I winnow spices. (Six bottles of ground cinnamon out to get us through the holidays, along with the four bottles of whole cloves.) Expiration dates lead me to dump an armful of flours and baking sodas, too.

Kathy is emptying shelves, wiping them down. As we work, we fill the “Trash” box three times, and the “Donate” box twice. Nothing worth selling. At the worst point, the table and every bit of counter are covered with stuff. But in the hour and half it takes me to dash to my sons’ school for their parent-teacher conferences, Kathy has much of it rearranged neatly on shelves.

The spices are now organized *alphabetically* on a stepped shelf, with all the extra cinnamons in the rear. All the food is now in one place – the pantry – rather than the three noncontiguous cabinets of my previous sin-filled life. And the circular corner cabinet that once groaned beneath the weight of canned goods and half-gallons of apple sauce now holds paper goods, oils and vinegars.

By late afternoon we’re both running out of steam. Stopping for tea, we take a few minutes to review. We’ve made it through 11 of the 12 steps that cover “Cupboards and Pantry.” All that’s left to do is buy (or have my Cub Scouts sons create) a recycling bin for the pantry floor and figure out where to store George Foreman and the Tupperware.

We discuss the eight steps of the “Processing Center” section of the plan, from “Put the dog items in the base cabinet of the hutch,” to “Put two hooks for kids’ backpacks under the counter at the end of the island.” Kathy already has purchased said hooks, as well as a three-level mail sorter for “Kay,” “Bill” and “Will & John.”

She recommends a basket to hold all the catalogs, followed by adherence to another important organizing doctrine – “the One In, One Out rule.” It’s the same rule that applies to magazines. When the new *Newsweek* arrives, last week’s must go, even if it means ripping out the unread articles of interest. Which sparks a discussion of our need for loose leaf binders filled with clear pages to hold everything I’m compelled to clip and save, from decorating ideas to book reviews to recipes.

A week later, we review the other sections of the plan, and tally what I owe for the Bed, Bath & Beyond purchases I’ve decided to keep: \$131.12. In addition, I’ve spent \$227 for her time organizing the kitchen and another \$178 for the plan. A more disciplined person might have accomplished much the same thing by using a loyal, organized friend willing to donate or barter a day.

But for me, Kathy has been worth it, for her professionalism, experience and shopping expertise. I will call her again when it’s time to tackle the garage, basement and bedrooms. Some day soon, I just know, I will be absolutely organized.