

Get Organized

Story by Sharon Caskey Hayes

Mark Dugger was drowning in stacks of paper. He had worked in the same office for 21 years, and couldn't see his desk for the clutter.

"My desk was covered about a foot in files all over it. I would have no place to work, and tried to work in my lap," said Dugger, an attorney in Elizabethton.

Dugger sought help from a professional organizer in October. Today, Dugger plans to start the new year with a clean office, a clear attitude and no clutter.

"I'm organized," Dugger said. "It's about the best thing you can do."

The National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO) has declared January as the first "Get Organized Month" to draw attention to the benefits of organization and to make folks aware that professional organizers are available to help. Mary Pankiewicz is the only NAPO-member professional organizer in the Tri-Cities region. She owns Clutter-Free & Organized, and travels across the area to serve residential and business clients with their organizational needs. She also teaches classes at the University of Tennessee, and is trained as a chronic disorganization specialist.

"It's more than just getting rid of clutter. When we open up the physical space, we clear space in our minds, too," Pankiewicz said.

She said getting organized – whether at home or at the office – is typically among the top three New Year's resolutions.

And getting organized is getting more attention, thanks to television shows such as Clean Sweep on TLC and Mission Organization on HGTV.

"It's great that there are TV shows out there and people are talking about organizing," Pankiewicz said.

But she said the TV shows are somewhat different from reality. "The difference from the TV shows – I never make a judgment on anything, and I never pull anything out of anybody's hands. I want them to keep what's important. And by letting go of what's not important, then they get to enjoy what's important. But it's their decision what goes and what stays," Pankiewicz said. According to NAPO, a professional organizer "enhances the lives of clients by designing systems and processes using organizing principles through transferring organizing skills."

A professional organizer also educates the public on organizing solutions and the resulting benefits, according to NAPO.

In the workplace, Pankiewicz helps both small offices and large corporations, providing seminars for employees and one-on-one coaching.

"I have a program where I go in and do a seminar for two hours and then I take the group of people and coach them for the rest of the day to make the transformation happen that day," Pankiewicz said. "It's a day dedicated to organizing."

Pankiewicz said she does lots of listening to help her clients

accomplish their goals.

"When I come in, I do a lot of listening because I want to develop a system that matches what I call the person's organizing personality," Pankiewicz said.

"For a person to maintain organization, the system has to be in harmony with their personality," she said.

Pankiewicz said she also teaches "desk rescue."

"That's when everything gets out of order, and that happens to all of us. You should pull back the chair, stand up, and just get everything in order," Pankiewicz said.

For Mark Dugger, Pankiewicz helped him overcome years of bad organizational habits.

"She started at one corner of the desk and started going through things. We spent a whole day, an entire day, cleaning out my office – just putting files up, throwing things away, stuff that had been sitting there and hadn't been used in years," Dugger said.

Pankiewicz designed an organizational system to fit Dugger's needs and office space. Now, files are lined in a credenza that sits behind Dugger's desk. When he needs a file, he simply turns around and retrieves it.

"It's improved the flow of work throughout the day. Before, I would misplace things and get frustrated. I'd have to stop everything and get my secretaries looking through everything. Now I know where things are. My desk is clear and I feel better at the end of the day. It's a lot less stressful," Dugger said.

Creating less stress is one of the biggest advantages of getting organized, Pankiewicz said.

"Most of the people who call me, they use the word 'overwhelmed.' They feel like they're drowning. At that point, it's hard to throw your own life raft," Pankiewicz said.

She said one of the hardest tasks in organizing a work space is going through

stacks of paper. Pankiewicz tries to turn the experience into a positive by calling a client's trash his trophies.

"Looking at paper is very stressful. In that stack, there may be things that are past due, things that should have been done. So when a person fills a black bag full of paper, they've looked at hundreds of sheets of paper. I think it's appropriate to call the bag their trophies," she said.

She said she encourages clients to use file folders to store papers.

"I got called in to work with a group where the people had spent three days looking for a sheet of paper – a very important sheet of paper. A file folder is a few cents. I encourage people to get the paper in that folder so they know where it is," Pankiewicz said.

Pankiewicz has been in business as a professional organizer for 10 years.

NAPO, with 2,900 members throughout the U.S. and in eight other countries, is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

For more information about NAPO, visit www.napo.net. For more information about Pankiewicz, go to www.clutterfree.biz.



Mary Pankiewicz