

getting your life in order: Pro organizer Jazz Barnett helps rid homes and offices of stressful clutter

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NASHUA — There are a lot of messed-up people in the world.

For that, professional organizer and declutter therapist Jazz Barnett is grateful. It provides her with full-time employment. And part-time bemusement.

"I find the biggest 'libraries,' so to speak, of 'How-to-organize' books in my most disorganized clients' homes," a smiling Barnett told about 100 spring cleaning-minded folks attending her "Organizing 101" presentation at the Nashua Public Library last month. "With one of my clients, as we were going through her house (tidying up), we found six or seven copies of the same book on organizing. She'd bought the book, misplaced it in the clutter, and kept buying the same book again."

For the record (and please DON'T write any of this down, as Jazz and the other 3,700 members of the National Association of Professional Organizers don't want you adding to the already alarming statistic that "95 percent of all our information is in paper form"), Barnett does not recommend buying lots of books on organizing.

"Who's going to have time to read them all?" she said.

But for the mess-malaised among us who do not plan to hire a professional organizer like Barnett to help them rediscover their home or office underneath those piles and piles and piles of stuff, there's one book that do-it-yourselfers might actually benefit from, according to Barnett: *Organizing from the Inside Out*, by Julie Morgenstern. A popular public TV personality and author known for her "hilarious" approach to organizing, Morgenstern created the SPACE technique that Barnett uses in her work daily. The five-letter acronym stands for: "Sort, Purge, Assign, Containerize and Equalize (stay on top of it)."

As an example of putting the SPACE technique into practice, Barnett suggests you take all those old clothes that have piled up in your bedroom. Please.

"When you go through your bedroom, take everything out of your closets, dressers — whatever or wherever is giving you problems — and just lay it all out," Barnett advised the audience. "You'll be amazed. You're going to find some things that just should not be living there."

It's likely that you'll find yourself saying, "Oh, I was looking for that!" at least once or twice during this process, said Barnett, repeating a phrase that professional organizers hear often. Not that said article really was worth "looking" for, or worth keeping.

"Sort the clothing in piles: One pile for 'Yes, I'll definitely wear it, I love it, and it still fits me.' And the 'No' pile. And you really need to be brutal with this," she said.

If you haven't seen a particular clothing item in next-to-forever, or if truthfully you had forgotten about it entirely, quickly toss it in the "No" pile, Barnett instructs. Be sure to use a non-see-through trash bag for this. Clear trash bags may engender second thoughts about throwing stuff away because you can still see it through the plastic, she said.

"When it comes to clothing, women especially might say 'If I lose those 10 pounds this will fit me,'" said Barnett. "(But) here's what I say. If you do the work and actually lose those 10 pounds? Then you deserve a new piece of clothing as a reward. Celebrate it, right?"

It may enhance your urge to purge if you consider donating the clothes, said Barnett, to the Salvation Army or similar charities. "Think about it as giving the piece of clothing new life elsewhere."

She happens to be a former Jazz dancer, but that's not how the stylish and svelte Barnett got her unusual first name. About 15 years ago, after the Disney movie *Aladdin*, came out, a friend's child began calling Barnett (who was then known by her birth name of Leslie), "Jasmine," because of her resemblance to the film's animated raven-haired princess. Her older friends soon

shortened it to "Jazz." Barnett decided she liked the name and kept it. At the time, she was employed at a busy architectural firm as a business manager. But in 1995, the magic carpet was yanked out from underneath Barnett as the architects suddenly downsized her out of a job.

"At that point I decided to start my own business," Barnett said. "I wrote down my strengths and skills."

Two of her strongest skills, Barnett realized, were organization and time management. At the outset she had no idea that a National Association of Professional Organizers existed, just an inkling that she could get paid to assist people in eradicating clutter in their home or office, and to show them how to better manage their time.

Ten years and thousands of contracts later, Barnett can now count herself among the most in-demand organizers of the 140 in the organization's New England chapter.

Barnett attributes enhanced public awareness of her profession in recent years to two popular cable TV shows, *Clean Sweep*, and *Mission Organization*. These shows send a message to the mass viewing audience similar to what Barnett has been telling clients one-on-one for a decade: Being disorganized can be hazardous to your health.

"Clutter drains our energy," she said, citing pro organizers' claims that the average person spends/wastes one year of his life looking for misplaced items.

"There's something physical that happens to us when we're surrounded by clutter. It can cause depression. But if your space is organized, your mind can think more clearly. You'll be amazed, when you start this process of organizing, how it's going to change your physical being."

Being neat — or messy — is not a genetic trait, Barnett insists. Experience tells her that organizing tendencies vary by the individual, and can run quite contrary to a person's upbringing.

"A lot of clients when they first call me say 'I wasn't born with the organizing gene.' I really don't believe in that. It might come more easily than others, but as long as you're willing to take the time, it's a skill that everyone can learn."

While January was designated as "G.O. Month" again this year (for "Get Organized") and organizing one's life continues to be the second-most common New Year's resolution after losing weight, Barnett says people should not hesitate to call for professional organizing help no matter what time of year the mood strikes.

"It's not really seasonal," Barnett said. "The feeling may strike a person at any time of year that they've gotten so disorganized with their life and there's so much stuff, clutter around them that they don't even know how to begin. (Professional organizers) all have our own style, but usually we're able to make a positive difference in people's lives. I think everyone can learn how to become organized and there's hope for everybody." On the Web: www.napo-newengland.com; www.jazzpersonalmanagement.com.