

this mold house

More tips for mending your broken home

UNFILED PAPERS ARE PUBLIC ENEMY NO. 1 FOR '09

By Renée Peck
InsideOut editor

I was going to write a column on getting organized a couple of weeks ago, but, well, where did I put those notes?

Like 70 percent of you, I resolved to get my affairs in better order this year. Getting organized was No. 3 on the Top 10 New Year's Resolutions list, according to a study by HCD Research, a company that specializes in such things. The top two resolutions for 2009 were losing weight and enjoying life more, which seem pretty much mutually exclusive to me. But I digress.

"Where are the bank statements from last year?" Stewart asked on New Year's Eve.

"You mean 2008?"

"No, last year — 2007."

"And why do we need those?"

It seems that the IRS allowed an additional filing extension for Louisiana residents because of Hurricane Gustav. And since we always put off paying taxes for as long as possible (which is not a financial decision, but a matter of procrastination), our official 2007 return was due on Jan. 5, 2009.

So that is why we spent most of the holiday — hours that might have gone more profitably into Christmas shopping or neighborhood caroling — digging through closets. (In case you wondered, most online banking sites allow you to retrieve statements up to 1 1/2 years old, which, for normal people, would be enough.)

"Here's January."

"I have part of March."

Like so many New Orleanians, my take on possessions changed after Hurricane Katrina. When you don't have a kitchen and are cooking on a camp stove, you discover pretty quickly that one saucpan serves as well as three. When the walls have been gutted, a folding chair is as fine a place to sit as a Louis XV upholstered side chair.

So it has been with some dismay that I have watched my closets fill anew. As I plowed through these newly cluttered spaces, I tried to take stock of their new and rampant growth.

A shopping bag of Carnival loot. OK, that makes sense.

Last year's Jazz Fest poster, which I never got around to framing.



A box of spare electronic parts, because who knows when you might need an extra USB cable.

A case of paper towels from that last trip to Sam's, and assorted NutriSystem containers left over from last year's resolution (No. 1: lose weight).

But mostly, I discovered, my closets bleed paper.

I sifted through folders documenting our various evacuation moves (appointment to connect utilities, Houston; digital cable order, St. Charles Avenue condo). There were boxes of in-

voices, work orders, contracts, catalogs and estimates having to do with the repair of our Lakeview home. Heaps and heaps of insurance stuff, including a half-inch-thick stack of Excel documents that listed, valued and described all the furnishings in the house before the storm. SBA loan applications, flood insurance findings, notes about Road Home and FEMA requirements. Flood maps and elevation mandates and city damage estimates.

More trees were killed by the bureaucratic aftermath of Katrina than by the storm itself.

"We could save the wetlands with all this stuff," I told Stewart.

I've often pondered the fact that the advent of the computer didn't curtail our use of paper, but rather increased it exponen-

tially. Computers and printers can spew out pulp a lot faster than my old Corona.

We are, alas, awash in printed pages.

So my resolution to get organized really involves combing through all those boxes and files and folders filled with papers, and rearranging it all. Because another lesson we have learned post-Katrina is: Never throw anything away. It will be the one form or document that some clerk who's holding back your insurance settlement asks for.

I recall a colleague coming to me in near tears last year; she had stored so many numbers on her Blackberry — Red Cross ID number, SBA loan number, Road Home application number, insurance account numbers, filing numbers and on and on — that she couldn't remember what was what.

People worry that, in the 21st century, each of us will be reduced to a mere number. In New Orleans, we've already been reduced to serial numbers.

Anyway, my organization resolution will involve crisp new folders and labels, neatly documented boxes and filing drawers.

Eight months from now, you'll probably find me in the back of a closet, digging through one of them in search of our January 2008 bank statements.

Next year, I'm definitely opting for Resolution No. 2: Enjoy life more. Look for me in the shredder aisle at Office Depot.

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How to get organized, from an expert

Being organized is a learned behavior, says professional organizer Jo Ann Coulter-Wientjes, of Sudden Changes Interiors in Metairie. Parents may not teach us how to organize, but we'll find a spouse or secretary to do it for us (Stewart, are you reading this?).

When she's hired to organize a space for a client, Coulter-Wientjes uses a method called STACKS, developed by an organizational training and products company called Clear and Simple Inc. (www.clearsimple.com). The acronym stands for Sort, Toss, Assign, Contain, Keep It Up and Simplify.

Learning to organize your things is a lot like house-training a puppy: It involves a lot of repetition. In fact, says Coulter-Wientjes, it takes 21 days to reprogram the mind to accept a new idea or process. Since that's about how long I give my annual New Year's Resolutions, I figure this time I have a shot at an organized household.

Here are Coulter-Wientjes' tips on how to get organized:

► Organize one area at a time.

- Choose a small area at first, so you can feel some immediate relief and success.
- Determine the priorities — in what order do you want to organize your home?
- Don't buy storage bins/boxes before you know the amount of items to be stored.
- Measure the storage area, then measure the items to be stored, so you know how much space is needed.
- Weed continuously, not just once a year or so.
- Plan to organize your personal paperwork at the end of each calendar year.
- Label everything with a label maker.
- Decide to decide — decide what to do with each item.
- Put things away as you are finished with them.
- Color code things if necessary.
- Teach children or grandchildren to put things away when they are 2 or 3; don't wait until they are old enough to complain about having to pick up their things. Make a game of picking up their toys.
- Store things according to the 80/20 Principle: We only use 20 percent of what we own 80 percent of the time.
- Keep a travel bag together with all your toiletries, so you don't have to put it together at the last minute.
- Keep a sturdy basket with handles on hand to hold items that belong in other rooms.
- Keep a plastic caddy with a center handle filled with your cleaning supplies, so you can take it room to room.
- For convenience, keep a cleaning caddy with cleaning supplies on each floor of your house.
- Keep a log of those items you have problems locating. This will help you determine what systems are needed or should be enhanced.
- Create a Landing Zone near your main entry to include a location for glasses, keys, charging station for cell phones/PDA's/iPOD's, mail, purse, wallet, etc.
- Create a Family Information Center to include a bulletin board, calendar, phone numbers, folders for each child's incoming school work to be reviewed and signed, and folders for bills to be paid.

— RENÉE PECK