

A helping hand out of the clutter

Sarah Richards meets the titans of tidy who rescue those who can't throw things away

Monty Arnold panicked last autumn when he received a call from his landlord announcing that a repairman would be round to fix some cracks in the ceiling. There was just one problem: no one could actually get around the columns of books, videocassettes and CDs in the bursting 400 sq ft apartment. Arnold had to turn sideways just to squeeze inside.

"I never really bought furniture," says Arnold, who moved into the one-bedroom rental in New York City's Upper West Side in 1976. "I just put stuff on the floor. I made neat piles."

The ceiling cracks forced him to contact Sande Nelson, one of America's growing number of organisational specialists. "It was so overwhelming I needed help. I was scared of becoming the third Collyer brother," he says, referring to the notorious hermits of Harlem, who kept their brownstone so full that one brother died in an avalanche of junk in 1947, leaving his bedridden sibling to starve to death.

Nelson, who started Get Organised 22 years ago to help people who can't throw things away, has helped thousands of clients. In 1989, she had clients who lived in hotels because they couldn't get into their apartments. So what are they saving? "Everything they've ever had. All the plastic forks, all the old toothbrushes... bills from 1960."

In one client's apartment, she had to clean out 425 boxes of stuff, including one filled with little pieces of paper he'd torn out from the Village Voice, a New York-based weekly.

Every organiser has a ho-

tor story. Laura Lakin, who has run ClutterBusters in Manhattan for eight years, tells of one woman who couldn't get near her wardrobe for several years. So she bought new clothes and hung them on the shower rail, which had to be cleared every time she bathed. Another client had no clear surface in his home so he was forced to use his toilet seat as a little desk.

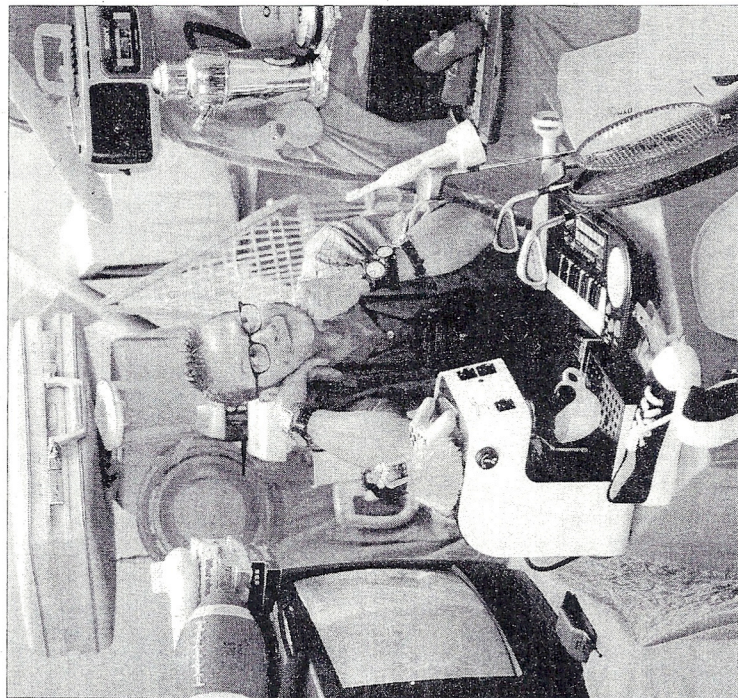
And Nelson recently sorted through a Greenwich Village brownstone that could only be accessed from the kitchen. It was "bug-ridden and brown with filth," she says, but she found several thousand dollars worth of antique books which the owners had forgotten. "They'd all gotten buried," Nelson says.

The problem of collecting too much stuff, though, goes beyond the eccentric Depres-

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sion-era aunt who can't throw away gift boxes or the woman who keeps her size 6 wardrobe because she will fit into it - someday. Hoarders, particularly those with small spaces in which to live, have lost the ability to manage their possessions and often feel deep shame. "These people are hiding in their stuff. They think the more you pile around you, the safer you'll be," says Ward.

The behaviour is so prevalent among the elderly that



There is hope, you know ...

the Weill Medical College of Cornell University last year formed the New York City Hoarding Task Force to study the problem. Ward, who manages about four projects a month, says that most of her clients range from information junkies who think they'll read every-

thing they come into contact with to people who've experienced a major life upheaval such as a divorce.

Some clients can take their own initiative after a two-hour consultation, but others need an organiser to go through "every sticky, every paper, every catalogue" with them, she adds. Before you go out and buy

more shelves, the volume of stuff has to be pared down. Not surprisingly, what should be discarded is often a matter of debate.

"I never tell anyone to throw anything away," says Ward. "If you want to keep 572 knitting magazines, you have to provide adequate space for them."

Sometimes, a little negotiating is called for. Nelson asks clients if a photograph could substitute for the actual item or reminds them that they can honour the love behind a gift and still toss it. There's also the reality-check approach of asking clients to try on an outfit so they can accept the hard truth that they will never squeeze into it again.

Teacher Robert Seaver, who also has an apartment on the Upper West Side, needed Lakin's firm touch a couple years ago to help him deal with his "boxes everywhere", bulging closets and about several hundred unsent Christmas cards that had been stuffed inside a drawer. Occasionally, he would answer her "You don't need this" with a "But I want to keep that!"

In the end, he surrendered enough worldly goods to fill a dozen trash bags. He says he wouldn't mind having Lakin back to help him sort through the new stacks of paper that have since invaded his home. "But I'm also saying to myself, 'Listen, kid, you're going to have to throw some of this stuff out,'" he says.

DETAILS

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