

BALANCING ACT

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Professional organizer helps family conquer clutter

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I want to join the conversation taking place in Pamela Fero's living room. But to make room for myself on the couch I must push aside Christmas lights, bags of beads, kids' school papers and toy trains. I clear a spot just big enough for my rear to hang over the edge of the cushion.

Around us, evidence of Pamela's busy life covers most surfaces -- granite kitchen counters peek out from piles of papers and unopened bills. The mother of six tells me the clutter makes her uncomfortable inviting guests over. Only 39 years old, this air traffic controller wants more organization in her life and Lauderhill home.

With me is Diane Hatcher, a no-nonsense expert at organizing space and time. Hatcher, a former school teacher and owner of TimeSavers Professional Organizing Services, quizzes Pamela on her goals and gauges her desire for change.

The two decide first to focus on clearing the active area of Fero's home -- the kitchen, family room and living room. Hatcher will teach Pamela a filing system to ensure appointments get kept, field trip forms get completed and bills get paid on time. Hatcher also will show Pamela how to improve her daily to-do list.

"The biggest challenge is there is not enough of me to go around," Pamela says. "I feel overwhelmed."

Yet Pamela has big dreams. She had wanted to start a jewelry making business, which explains the shelves stacked with containers of beads smack in the middle of her living room. She now wants to start a meal assembly business, which explains the literature piled on her countertop.

To get started on the balance makeover, Hatcher and Pamela attack a plastic bin on the couch by putting items in the rooms they need to go -- Christmas ornaments in the garage, toys in the kids rooms. "Put like with like," Hatcher says. "Everything needs a home, even if that means it gets tossed in a junk drawer."

More advice from Hatcher: "If something is broken, it goes right to the garbage. If it hasn't been used in a while, ask yourself, 'What's the worst thing that could happen if I didn't have the item. Can I borrow it from someone? Is it worth taking up space?'"

This isn't going to be easy, Pamela says. "My husband is a pack rat."

Husband Terry works the night shift seven days a week as a mechanic for Coca-Cola. On this morning, Terry entertains the couple's youngest, 3-year-old Quentin, with an interactive TV learning game. Terry wanders into the living room occasionally, acknowledging that he's onboard with the de-cluttering. Hatcher insists that Pamela urge Terry to share responsibility for putting things back where they go and getting rid of things they don't need.

"You will feel calmer when the space you live in is cleared," Hatcher says.

Moving on, Hatcher wants Pamela to tackle the piles of paper. Two of Pamela's six children now are adults and have moved out. But three are school age -- Keenen, 14; Warren, 8; and Monika, 6 -- and bring home forms to sign, homework to peruse and invitations to put on the calendar.

PAPER PANDEMONIUM

We sit around the dining-room table, the only clutter-free surface I saw. Pamela lugs over a stack of paperwork from various rooms. Like Mary Poppins pulling from her bottomless carpetbag, Hatcher yanks out plastic trays, a label maker and manila file folders to devise a paperwork system.

Hatcher stacks the trays four high and labels them: To Do, To Read, To File, Miscellaneous. When sorting, Hatcher gives these tips:

- **With invitations** or papers about upcoming school events, the date goes on the calendar, RSVPs are made, and then they go in an upcoming events folder in the miscellaneous tray
- **Recipes** are tossed or placed near cookbooks
- **Manuals** are saved in a folder in a file cabinet
- **Receipts** are stapled to warranties and also filed.

With a garbage can next to her, Pamela sorts and tosses.

To track appointments, Pamela uses a PDA. Hatcher wants Pamela to keep a written daily to-do list and number the tasks by priority. Hatcher also suggests Pamela put two days a month on her calendar to pay bills. And she prods Pamela to delegate more responsibility to her children, husband and nanny.

In some ways, Pamela shows just how organized she can be. During our morning visit, a crock pot with pork roast was cooking the evening's dinner. This works for her most nights. But because Pamela's work schedule changes each week, some nights she just wings it, relying on the nanny to make hot dogs or pick up take-out.

"I'd like to get more organized about dinners," Pamela says. "I think it would save me time and streamline the groceries and shopping."

PROGRESS REPORT

When I check in with Pamela five days later, she has made progress in scheduling, delegating and decluttering.

This week, she made a menu for the week, noting what needs to be thawed or purchased. Instead of scheduling activities one after another, she schedules what needs to get done first, creating order on her to-do list.

"It's challenging trying to coordinate the kids schedule with mine," Fero says. But using Hatcher's advice, she now has her children putting more of their events or appointments on the wall calender. She transfers all that information into her PDA.

And together, Pamela and Terry tackled the living room, putting all the toys away or pitching them.

Even with all of Pamela's time demands, she still ponders the meal preparation business.

Hatcher advices her to use her new skills to rid her home of piles first.

"You need to clear the physical clutter to clear the way to take on new things."

We will check back with the Feros in a few weeks. Look for the next makeover in February.

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