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A glimpse into the minds of Atlanta's organizers

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May 2005

**Only the Best
for Your Best
Friend****What are the biggest
organization mistakes
you see people make?****Right in Their
Own Backyards****The
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Furniture Buying****PAST ISSUES**

Bacon: People organize and make the space look good, but it turns out not to be functional or very difficult to keep up. They fall back to old habits, and before you know it, they are back where they started.

Carter: Over-shopping is one of the most common habits causing disorganization today. There was a time when people only purchased things they needed. I am a reformed estate-sale junkie. I think I bought stuff for the excitement of getting a bargain (which I learned from my mom). Today, many people buy things to make them feel better, to overcome boredom, because they don't want their kids to feel deprived and many more reasons. They cram their closets and their pantries full until they don't know what they have and there is no way to organize it.

Kolberg: People tend to take on too many projects at the same time with equal passion, rather

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Angela Bacon discovered professional organizing while working as an interior designer and decorator. She noticed that if a client's home was disorganized, all her hard work became hidden by clutter. Previously, she worked as a marketing director and a computer system trainer.
After a few years of working

than taking on projects in phases over time. They also tend to wait too long to get help clearing out clutter.

Plait: I see clients who go too far one way or another with paper retention. You don't want to keep everything, but you also don't want to throw it all away. Ask yourself if you will need or want it again. Obviously, you want to keep legal documents and tax-related documents. On the other hand, you probably don't need a receipt from the grocery store that is six months old. Check with your accountant and then set some guidelines.

Ricci: One of the most common mistakes people make is trying to organize before they declutter. Culling out what is no longer giving value is the first step to take in the organizing process. You can't organize clutter. You have to first sort it to eliminate what is no longer important and then you can get to the business of classifying, sorting and storing. Another common mistake people make is buying organizing tools before they know what they need.

What are your biggest do's and don'ts?

What pieces of advice can you offer?

Bacon: **Do** try to keep a function in one area. For example, scrapbooking on the kitchen counter, on your bed and in the basement is a surefire recipe for clutter buildup. Keep your scrapbooking in one area all the time with all the tools you need to complete your project at hand. **Don't** try to tackle too much at one time. It's better to do one small space at a time well before proceeding to the next. **Do** establish a schedule for cleaning up. If you are not good at cleaning up after yourself as you go, establish a "pick up" time

exclusively in interior design, she began adding organizing as an offered service. "Along with my organizing skills, I bring the ability to make a space beautiful, the understanding of ergonomics and space planning, work flow and function, the knowledge of physiological responses to color, and how to use all those tools to make the room function for its intended purpose," Bacon says.

As a working mother, Bacon says she understands how hard it is to maintain order in a busy house. She also speaks Spanish fluently, "thanks to my Colombian mother, who insisted all her kids speak the language."



Allison Caputo

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Allison Caputo has been a corporate interior designer for more than 10 years, and although she still works part time for a design firm in Atlanta, she plans to become a full-time organizer within the next year.

Caputo says she realized several years ago that she wanted to start her own business. At first, she wasn't sure what her specialty would be, but after a lot of soul searching and extensive research, she discovered the National Association of Professional Organizers and found her niche. Because of her design background, Caputo says she is able to offer her clients a combination of function and aesthetics. "Having an aesthetically pleasing organizational system can improve the image and feel of any room of a home or space in a corporate office," she says. "Adding color or accessories as part of the project can help pull the space together and give it a new life, not just get it cleaned up."

Caputo says she loves to travel, and she tries to plan a major vacation at least every 18 months. This year she hopes to take a trip to Chile and Argentina.

every evening and stick to it. It soon becomes automatic, and kids are especially successful at this method of cleanup.

Caputo: **Do** make lists before you go shopping. Not only will you save time by going to a store once and getting all the items you need in a fewer number of stops, but you'll also only buy what you need, sticking to your family budget and making it back in time to start on that project at home you've been meaning to get to.

Carter: If you **don't** need it, use it, or love it, **don't** keep it. **Do** weed out constantly. The less you have, the less there is to organize.

Kolberg: **Do** get support to organize and maintain your organizing systems. **Don't** rely on yourself if getting organized is not your strength. **Do** use vertical, not horizontal, file folder and paper holders. Vertical is visible, horizontal is hidden. **Do** use color as a cue to action. **Don't** just use manila.

Plait: **Do** purchase a good crosscut shredder that will shred paper and credit cards. It is so risky to toss your private information in the trash. Identity theft is such a huge issue now. **Don't** put your outgoing mail in your box unless you know the mail person is coming soon. People steal outgoing mail looking for checks. Find a mailbox and consider using online banking and bill-pay services.

Ricci: **Do** increase your awareness. Be aware of where your disorganization is coming from so you can address it at its source. **Do** live within your space. Be realistic about how much space you have. **Do** know your priorities. The secret to getting what you want out of life is knowing what you want out of life. Sit down and write out your top five priorities for this month,



Allison Carter

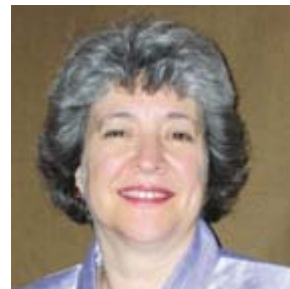
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Before becoming a professional organizer, Allison Carter was a national assignment editor at CNN. Through working with a life coach, Carter defined her values and needs for her next career. "It didn't take long to discover that my talent was in organizing and my passion was in teaching others to declutter and organize their lives," she says. A busy mother, Carter says she emphasizes family dynamics and finding ways to organize a whole house with the entire family involved. "I like to make it easy enough for kids to do," she says. She also has developed a home-manager filing system that has a place for everything a family needs to keep, including schoolwork, keepsakes and activity information.

Carter loves to decorate her own home with '50s- and '60s-era furniture and collectibles. "I had to stop buying it when my display space filled up, but I still love to look at it," she says.



Judith Kolberg

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and when planning your schedule, make sure that the tasks you are doing support those priority items.

What is the most challenging part of your job?

Bacon: Keeping clients on track after the initial organizing job is by far the hardest part for me. Hey, that is hard even in my own home. I do try to keep up with my clients and see what is working and what is not working, and then I like to offer “fine-tuning” services a few months after the project, to go in and maybe tweak things a little to make them more effective.

Caputo: One of the most challenging aspects of my job is figuring out the specifics of each and every client. Some individuals are very visual, while others need a logical, by-the-numbers approach. Being a professional organizer requires having to interview and truly get to know the individual you’re working with. Sometimes these personality traits are hidden below the surface, and you have to help them become apparent.

Carter: The most challenging part is making organizing feel fun. A lot of clients think it is a bore and a chore, but a friend or P.O. [professional organizer] can make it bearable and even enjoyable.

Kolberg: Keeping up with demand. We live in a society that generates a lot of clutter and paper, requires us to make many decisions and provides very little time for everything we need to get done. Gratefully, I am able to draw from other organizers in metro Atlanta who can work on projects with me as subcontractors.

Plait: Making time for myself is a constant challenge. Managing my own business involves so

Judith Kolberg says she learned a lot about organizing through her prior career as a professional political organizer, working for various causes and campaigns. Before becoming a professional organizer, Kolberg would help her boss and co-workers get organized. “You become pro when you finally start to charge money for organizing that you used to give away for free,” she says. Kolberg specializes in helping those with chronic disorganization problems. She also specializes in organizing high-level executives who want to be more productive. Kolberg also has authored three books about organizing: *Conquering Chronic Disorganization*, *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life* and *Organize for Disaster: Prepare Your Family and Your Home for Any Natural or Unnatural Disaster*.



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Lynn Plait, who holds a master’s degree in social work with a concentration in policy and planning, spent more than 20 years working in the banking industry before becoming a professional organizer four years ago.

“I decided to use my banking knowledge and my innate ability to see the order in things,” Plait says. “I love people, and I enjoy solving their problems, empowering them and making their lives easier.” Plait helps her clients organize their financial records using financial software and a workable filing system. She also helps them track expenses for financial planners, prepare the tax documentation for their accountants, and sometimes even pay their bills, usually online.

Plait says her husband decided to start his own business at the same time she started hers. “Our income has been interesting at times,” she says.

much more than the time I spend with clients. I am also the bookkeeper, the marketing person and the visionary. It's hard for me to put it down and just relax.

Ricci: Believe it or not, the administrative duties are the most challenging part of my job. I just hate that kind of work!

What's the strangest thing you've ever seen while organizing?

The grossest?

The funniest?

Bacon: The grossest thing I come across is old food. I have seen food that was a week old, or at times, months old—which obviously leads to critters invading the area. Luckily, I haven't ever come face to face with a live animal living off the old food.

Caputo: The strangest thing I've seen while organizing is probably also the grossest. I worked with a client on her bedroom and found several bags of half-eaten fast food at least a month old, with French fries smashed into the carpet. I don't think her carpet had been vacuumed in over a year.

Carter: I love the big sorting process. To me it's like a treasure hunt. I almost always find money or gift certificates; the bigger the pile, the bigger the treasure. Just this week I found a gift card worth \$500. Once I found \$30 in cash tucked inside a greeting card that was a first birthday present for a baby. That baby was 15 years old when I found it.

Kolberg: The strangest thing I have seen is the fellow who used his oven as storage for books and cassette tapes. Clearly he does not plan to cook. The grossest was the woman who collected nail clippings. I turned down that job. And the funniest are the children who organize by hiding things.

Ricci: On occasion, I have seen some things that took me by surprise or could be embarrassing for the client to know that I saw. Part of the art to this business is being able to remain calm and to not judge the client in the midst of the discovery.



Monica Ricci

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Monica Ricci says she became a professional organizer in 1998 because she wanted a business that would be a natural expression of herself. "I thought becoming a professional organizer was the perfect mesh of my skills," she says. Ricci has 18 years of experience in the hotel and restaurant industry. Ricci works with clients in residential, business and corporate settings. She prides herself on being flexible and nonjudgmental with a lighthearted approach. "My goal is to make the process of getting organized as fun and enjoyable as possible," she says.

When she's not organizing, Ricci enjoys competitive pistol shooting, and she is an NRA-certified pistol instructor.

Do you have any heartwarming stories to share from your organizing experiences?

Bacon: After the initial consult and client interview, I can feel the apprehension and sense of shame fade away and a sense of relief coming from the client. It is so difficult to feel defeated every day before you even walk out the door—to live in a space that is working against you. I can feel they can see the light at the end of the tunnel; I can feel their hope for something different for themselves and their families. I really like bringing that kind of hope to people and helping my clients get there.

Caputo: One client and her husband were in their 60s and beginning to consider retirement. Her brothers and sisters had children, and the client was the only sibling with no kids of her own. Because of this, she became the family historian. Her brothers and sisters granted her the “privilege” of storing and keeping all of the family’s heirlooms. She was paralyzed about getting rid of anything relating to her family’s past. We spent painstaking hours together looking at all sorts of artifacts from her family’s history. I helped her sort into bins items that she wanted, items that she was going to give back to her siblings and items she planned to donate to a local historical society for the Jewish faith. When I left she stood up, began to cry and gave me a huge hug. She was speechless, and so was I.

Carter: We all do this for the hugs. Not many people get to hug their clients.

Kolberg: One woman was about to be evicted. We organized her apartment from top to bottom so quickly and completely (using a crew) that the landlord changed his mind, the client saved her home, and I felt very glad to be doing what I do.

Plait: The work I do is highly confidential. Clients allow me to see very private information. I often remark that I have seen so much and know so much that I could already have written that book and made millions, but I know I never will. I do, however, love dogs! I am overjoyed when I discover that a client has a dog or two. I always have dog biscuits with me. So now the joke is that one day I am going to write a book about my clients’ dogs. (A special hello to Buddy, who eats Cheez Whiz!)

Ricci: Every time I leave a client and they have experienced a positive change in their environment, it’s heartwarming. One lady e-mailed me to say that after attending one of my seminars, she successfully cleaned out several file boxes worth of old files that had been weighing on her mind for 10 years. She couldn’t have been more thrilled, and of course, that was gratifying for me. Also, while I was working with a recent client, she discovered \$150 in cash that she had forgotten all about. Bonus!

Is there a certification program for professional organizers?

All of the professional organizers profiled here are members of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). Although NAPO does not currently have a certification program for professional organizers, the association is working to establish one by 2007. Members of NAPO agree to uphold a code of ethics as practicing members of the association, and many attend seminars and

conferences designed to keep them abreast of industry advances.

What do professional organizers charge?

Some organizers charge by the hour or by the day, others charge by the project, and many use a combination of fee systems, depending on the scope of each organizing job. A flat fee is often charged for an initial assessment of what services are needed. Hourly rates for professional organizers in Atlanta can range from \$40 an hour to more than \$100 an hour.