

## One Couple Organized House for New Year, Said it's Best Investment Ever!

By Cathi McLain

If, like me, you enjoy watching Do It Yourself (DIY) shows on television, you have likely watched home organization and hoarder horror shows. The shows involve one part design, one part psychology and two parts common sense. Unfortunately for me, I can see the problems and the fixes for others; but when it comes to my own chaos, it's not so easy. While most of my home is organized and tidy, I have always struggled with desktop clutter. My own clutter was bad enough, but then we started receiving my mother-in-law's forwarded mail. She was on every "sucker list" soliciting donations, plus she got newsletters, catalogs and bills. It was out of control.

When we bought our house two years ago, the added office was a big selling point. The previous owner had converted the attic of our El Dorado floor plan into office and art space with built-in desks and cabinets and an additional room with custom cabinets and space for file cabinets and seasonal storage. Unfortunately, the desk space is linear; and we struggled with trying to create a



*The McLain's office before it was organized.*

workable "L" on each side within the narrow confines of the space, which has a staircase coming up the middle.

In 2003, when organizing shows were all the rage, I met Vickie Norris, owner of Restoring Order. At the time, she was doing segments on *AM Northwest* and soon became a regular on *Mission Organization*, an HGTV show. It was perfect timing for us. In all of our years of marriage, we have seldom fought; but when it came to cleaning the garage, it was always a battle. John and I could never agree on what to keep, what to toss and where to put it. Hiring one of Vickie's staff to help us was a revelation. She was a perfect third party to settle our differences. She identified our styles, the issues we were dealing with and set us to work. We hired a drop box and emptied the garage. Old dysfunctional shelving was tossed and new shelves assembled, old paint was taken to Metro and many trips were made to Goodwill. We replaced opaque boxes and bins with transparent ones and set up specific areas within the garage for camping, sporting goods, paints, home repair, Costco supplies, etc. Once it was done, it just took a brief tweaking every six months to de-clutter and keep things nice. Thirteen years later, we still keep two cars in the ga-



*The McLain's office after it was organized.*

rage and recently reorganized our current garage to make space for a golf cart and both cars.

With the success of the previous experience in mind, I contacted Restoring Order again. We set up 4 four-hour appointments to get the work done. And they do pitch in! Organizer Colette Eaton arrived ready to go. The first step was to clear the clutter (see before picture on page 5). This involved a lot of tossing and rearranging. We filled the recycling bin twice. The small desk that wasn't working for me was moved to John's side and fit his space perfectly. We moved file cabinets and brought up a temporary, but functional, four-foot folding table that fits my space and creates the perfect "L" shape that I need. Once the mess was cleared, we used file trays that I already had but which were just being piled with paper and created trays for "To do," "To Pay," "To Review" and "Send to Betty" (my mother-in-law's mail). Each visit ended with a homework assignment involving shredding, sorting or going to Goodwill. With the layout in place, we cleaned out and reorganized the filing system, cleaned out and organized deep awkward drawers and created a Household Reference Binder. This notebook houses coupons, gift cards, auction purchase certificates, service providers' cards, restaurant take-out menus and all those pieces that contributed to my desktop clutter.

The process can be exhausting, and it involves an investment of

time and money (about \$1,500 for us); but the result is liberating. No more searching again and again through the same piles and not finding what we're looking for. No more bringing work downstairs, because the office is unpleasant to work in. It is the perfect way to begin the new year. If our previous experience is any indicator, with systems in place that we can continually tweak and re-use, it's the best investment we will make this year, or any year, for that matter.

### **A Few Tips to Manage Paper**

- Purge the files regularly. My files were jammed with previous years' documents that didn't need to be saved. Yes, keep financial records with tax returns (seven years); but no need to keep most other documents past the current year.
- Set up a system to sort the onslaught of paper that comes in the door. Toss the junk mail immediately, then sort keepers: To Do, To Pay, To Read, To File. Whatever works for you.
- Set up a system for current projects, such as upcoming trips, household projects and tax documents. For me it's a vertical file holder that sits on top of the desk.
- Organize files into appropriate categories: financial, medical, personal, property and professional.
- Set up e-billing, if available, so you can eliminate the paper altogether.