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A gift for yourself: Order

Organizer's business grows at holidays

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Jammed holiday to-do lists mean more business for professional organizer Carson Tate.

Year-round, Tate's Living Simply brings order to crazy schedules and messy desks, to kitchen cabinets and filing cabinets, to clogged e-mail and toy chests. But a few weeks ago, the holiday crisis calls started.

Demand now is heaviest for Tate's Charlotte company and her staff of four organizers to bring sanity to overbooked schedules, eliminate home chaos and make way for a more orderly new year at home and the office.

"We're helping people get cleaned out for the holidays," said Tate, 30 and a native of Columbia. "They know the onslaught of people and stuff is on its way."

Living Simply, nearly two years old, is part of the nation's personal-services industry that includes dog walkers, errand runners, personal shoppers, personal chefs and others catering to the busy who can afford chore outsourcing. Tate goes beyond supplying services to helping clients learn new habits to better manage time and possessions.

Initially, she felt called to the ministry and planned to be a hospital chaplain. She chose other people-oriented careers, including stints in human resources and nonprofit fundraising. A few years ago, she was a sales rep for a major pharmaceutical company. She found herself helping colleagues organize their customer follow-up, their routes and their in-car office set-ups.

She had a "light-bulb moment" and decided to make a business of helping people get a grip on their stuff and their time.

"The payoffs are the changes I can see in my clients," she said. "They have a system for keeping their homes and lives on track. They have regained a sense of control and have a little more time for something they want to do."

Costs range from \$200 for four hours of consultation and hands-on sorting to several thousand dollars for the packing and unpacking of a major move.

For business customers, Living Simply evaluates work processes and office organization to improve efficiency. Tate will help make to-do lists more effective, establish better routines for handling voice mail and organize files for faster retrieval.

On the residential side, work ranges from organizing family photos, helping decide how to eliminate mountains of accumulations and untangling Christmas decorations.

The goal is always the same: How can you best organize your work and possessions so that you don't waste time? And the solutions have to be sustainable.

"If you can't maintain it, what's the point?" Tate said.

Her advice isn't new. But many of us still have trouble saying no, filing papers so we can find them and ditching clutter that clogs our living space and our minds.

Kim Cobb, a Charlotte mother of three and a federal lobbyist, hired Living Simply this summer because "I was opening too many cupboards that were chaos."

Cobb says she's not a "neat freak," but the disarray made her feel bad, slowed her down and distracted her from work.

Tate helped weed out toys the kids no longer played with and devised a storage plan so the kids can pick up after themselves. She also organized the kids' closets, Cobb's home office and the kitchen catch-all desk.

Cobb says she feels better, works better and has more time now for family, friends and other important pursuits.

"More than anything, she made me feel I had control of my life," she said.

But even a professional can't get everything in its place. Tate admits that two kitchen junk drawers thwart her best efforts.

So, she said, "I have let it go."

How to Tackle That Holiday To-Do List

Here are tips from professional organizer Carson Tate. • Choose "consumable gifts" that can be bought and given easily. Consider gift certificates, widely available for goods and services, such as video rentals or a day at the spa. Or make a gift of your time.

- Buy items in bulk, such as notepads customized with each recipient's name.
- Tap your outside resources. Hire a baby sitter so you can shop or plan or even stay in another part of the house working. Have your teenagers run a few errands.
- Decide what you are not going to do this holiday and stick to it. No holiday parties the week before Christmas? No end-of-year business newsletter? Who says you have to do everything?
- For the big meals, have everyone bring something -- and take home the dirty dish to wash. (Consider this one as you survey the dishes from today's big feast.)
- Cook big and freeze. Make two casseroles instead of one and stock the freezer to ease the dinner-prep crunch for a night or two.
- Take advantage of stores and services that wrap and ship gifts for you.
- Save travel and shopping time by using online store gift registries to choose and ship your gifts.
- Set clear spending limits on gifts to reduce time and energy haggling over this sensitive topic.
- After the holidays, pack decorations in containers identified by room so next year's decorating gets off to a faster start.
- Take notes this year to help streamline the 2007 holidays. Where did you buy the best poinsettias? Who's on your cookie list? Where was that cut-a-tree place in the mountains that had hay rides and hot chocolate?
- Call a friend today and set a non-negotiable time for coffee or lunch during the holidays. That's an official break for you -- no cell phones, no e-mail.
- Set "task times." With time scheduled, you're forced to be more productive. Set a start and stop for work; have an office mate remind you and make you turn off the light and go home.
- Turn off your Blackberry. For real.

We Want to Hear From You

Realtor Jen Mildenberger is stressed just thinking about all she likes doing to make the holidays special, from baking to family gatherings. Her secret stress fighter is maintaining her weekday morning workouts.

What are the biggest time-eaters that the holidays add to your to-do list? Tell us how you juggle those extras and beat stress. We'll share your ideas and give you experts' advice for making the most of your valuable time during this busy season. Call reporter Stella Hopkins at 704-358-5173 or e-mail shopkins@charlotteobserver.com.

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