

The Organizer

BY JONAH SANDFORD 243-2122

Penelope Rose Miller's career as a professional organizer began three years ago, at the entrance to an apartment in San Francisco.

From the doorway of the apartment, which belonged to a successful female professional, Rose Miller could see nothing but stuff. Everywhere. Each room was filled with mountains of clutter, untouched and unused for months or years. The only open spaces were narrow pathways through the mess, winding from room to room. One room was completely sealed off with hoarded items stacked from floor to ceiling.

It was time to get to work.

These situations are what Rose Miller and nearly 4,000 other members of the National Association of Professional Organizers, an organizing body for a profession that many don't even know exists, deal with for a living. "POs" enter a house, office or other space that has reached a state of extreme clutter or disarray and work with the owner to make the space livable or usable again.

It's often more than a matter of tidying. Rose Miller, 29, who moved herself and her business to Portland last year, divides her clients into two groups. Most of the people she deals with she describes as "clutterers," who simply don't have enough hours in the day to deal with the constant stream of stuff that builds up in their lives. But there are other people, like that first client in San Francisco, for whom the inability to throw things away is a much larger problem.

"This is a serious illness," says Rose Miller of the "people who hoard," a group she estimates makes up about 10 percent of her business. "It's a disease, and these people have so much stuff that it impedes their life. All these things that to you might look meaningless, like tissues with something written on them, are extremely important to them and it impedes their life so much that they can't use their space for what it's actually meant for."

Rose Miller offers several explanations for these people's inability to get rid of things. Many are filling the void left by a lost loved one, or have a debilitating fear of letting things go. Some get sentimental over things as mundane as old receipts. Many of her clients exhibit obsessive-compulsive tendencies. And in the case of many, they feel desperately alone in the worlds they have created.

"The problem with hoarding is that people



PRO ORGANIZER: Penelope Rose Miller helps make the impossible possible.

are so ashamed of this secret that they don't seek treatment," says Rose Miller. "They don't seek help, and so people don't know how to treat it, which is really upsetting. I tell everybody that I work with that you are so not alone."

Hearing Rose Miller talk about the relationships she forms through her work often sounds, unsurprisingly, like the relationships between a patient and a therapist. Barriers are broken down, insights are reached.

"It takes a lot of coaching, bringing awareness to how they're becoming trapped by their stuff," she says of the organizing process. "We start with one item. I tell people to be ruthless about it. Do you love it? Are you going to use it?"

In the case of that first client in San Francisco, Rose Miller was the first person, other than direct family, who had been allowed into the woman's apartment in 15 years. There was a lot of crying during their first session. But after a year of weekly and bi-weekly four-hour sessions working together in the apartment, Rose Miller and the woman were able to make the space livable again. Says Rose Miller, looking back on the process, "We excavated, literally, her life."

Penelope Rose Miller, 807-4687,
organizemepenelope.com.