

METROUS

MAGAZINE

Rockin' Natick

Where teen bands rise from the basement to the stage

INSIDE

TRUTH AND
CONSEQUENCES AT
WELLESLEY COLLEGE
IN A FINE MESS? SHE'LL
HELP YOU GET OUT OF IT
HOW YOU CAN SAVE A
CHILD'S LIFE

What, you worry?

Not if Framingham organizer Michele Matties can help it



Michele Matties helped Adrienne Balk of Sherborn winnow her belongings before a move. Her bedroom before (above right) and after.

MICHELE MATTIES crouches on a bedroom floor before a trunk, surrounded by towels, T-shirts, dresses, and blankets. She has gone where few mothers dare to tread: into the closets and dressers and under the bed of a teenage daughter.

Not that she is the least bit daunted. What “jazzes” her is getting calls from people who “think they have something so big that it can’t be solved, and we solve it,” says Matties, who launched her Framingham-based No Worries Organizing a dozen years ago. “If they need someone in that struggle with them, I’ll be there.”

On this bright winter Saturday, Matties is helping 13-year-old Adrienne Balk sort through two rooms of belongings. Her mother, Polly Vernimen, 46, is facing a deadline to put their Sherborn house on the market as part of a divorce settlement with her ex-husband, who moved out a year ago.

She was reluctant at first to bring in an outsider. “I never try to make things easy for myself. I always do things the hard way,” says Vernimen, who is recruitment and marketing coordinator for the

Guess what she found

Do you know what is in your house? Here are some of the more "interesting" things Michele Matties discovered while putting homes and offices in order:

- An Academy Award nominee plaque
- A Super Bowl ring
- Remains of humans and of pets
- Weapons
- Unbilled receivables totaling more than \$1 million
- Checks, stocks, bonds, and cash
- Letters telling behind-the-scenes accounts of historic events
- A Social Security number—scribbled on an envelope—that could help a daughter find the father she had never known

Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton.

She and her two daughters will be moving to a smaller home, forcing them to pare down possessions accumulated over 6 1/2 years in Sherborn and 13 years before that in South Natick. As the move date drew closer, Vernimen realized she would "be a basket case if I try to do this all myself."

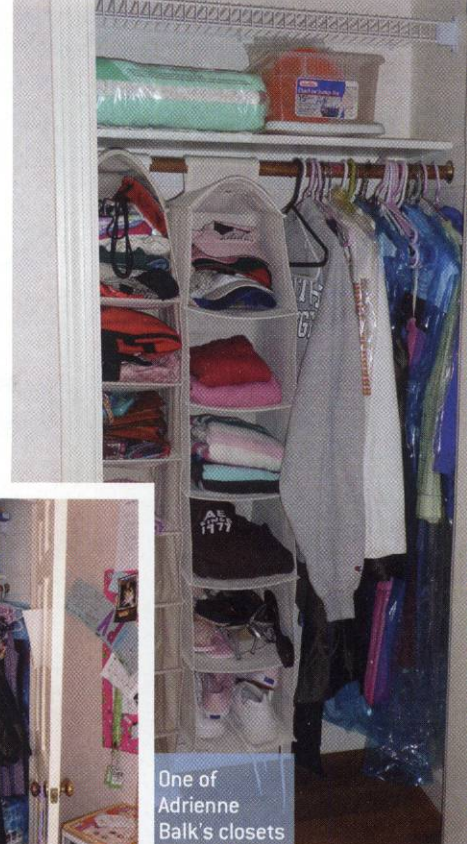
She invited Matties over for a strategy session in December. "She had a way of visualizing this, sketching it out, figuring out how long it would take," Vernimen says. "Once I felt like I had a long-term plan I really felt like the weight was lifted."

WHETHER HER CLIENT is a lawyer overwhelmed with phone calls or a professional couple who have lost track of their bills, Matties sees herself performing the same basic job: helping people "get to a better place in their life."

Her Web site lists her credentials, including a bachelor's in management/marketing from Binghamton University in New York and a previous career as a buyer for Filene's. But much of what she brings to her job is intangible. Words like empathetic, intuitive, and sensitive come to mind as I watch her in action. She's a coach, cheerleader, and—as Vernimen has come to appreciate—



One of Adrienne Balk's closets before (inset) and after.



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ate—a shoulder to lean on. But one thing she is not is a fussbudget.

“Organization is not perfection,” Matties says. “There isn’t just one way of doing it.”

She says one of her favorite sayings is that “organization is the state of ready.” That means clearing away the clutter, both material and mental. “If the things I can control are in place,” she says, “then I will never regret an opportunity lost because I was not in a position to capitalize upon it.”

Matties readily admits she doesn’t have all the answers. Instead, she prides herself on asking the right questions. “I’ve been told my mission in life is to challenge and question things.”

“Organization is the state of ready. ... If the things I can control are in place, then I will never regret an opportunity lost because I was not in a position to capitalize upon it.” —MICHELE MATTIES

So if you hire her, expect to be grilled: Do you really plan to fix that broken microwave you put in the basement? Do you really think you’ll be giving your sister that box of baby clothes? When was the last time you used the bread maker that takes up so much space on your counter? Do you really need electric bills going back 20 years?

VERNIMEN SAYS SHE and Matties talked a lot about the psychology of stuff. “People tend to bond with objects,” Vernimen says, “like when I picked up an old stuffed animal that I hadn’t seen in years and years—just touching the thing, holding it ... all the memories that get churned up.”

Matties “can look at your stuff without the same emotional attachment,” Vernimen says. “I can go through a chest of stuff and read the old letters and just get carried away. But she keeps you on task.”

Vernimen says her younger daughter is like her when it comes to possessions. “For Adi, stuff matters. I could not go in there as her mother and just matter of factly work through things to organize, throw away. We would have been within an hour yelling. Tears would flow.”

But all is calm upstairs today as Matties helps Adi



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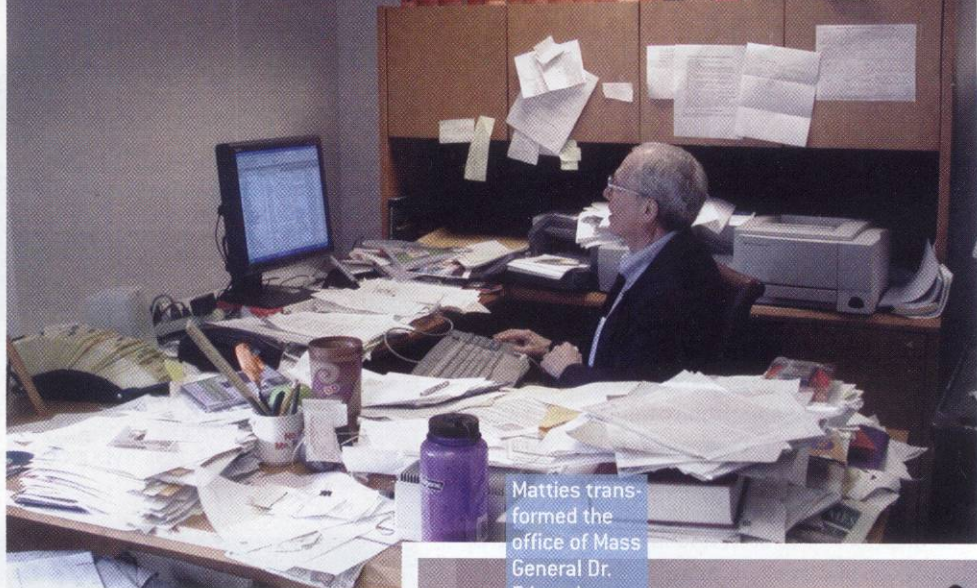
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Matties transformed the office of Mass General Dr. Edward Lowenstein.

sort and pack her summer camp things. Together, they go through shorts, dresses, socks, stationery, and even pens and pencils. This is Adi's second session with Matties, and she has gotten into the spirit. She is quick to spot duplicates, clothing she's outgrown, and T-shirts too shmutzy to salvage. They move on to dressers and a closet, with Matties putting Adi to work culling her jewelry. Adi spots a ribbon from her old teddy bear. That's a keeper, so Matties deposits it into a memorabilia box.

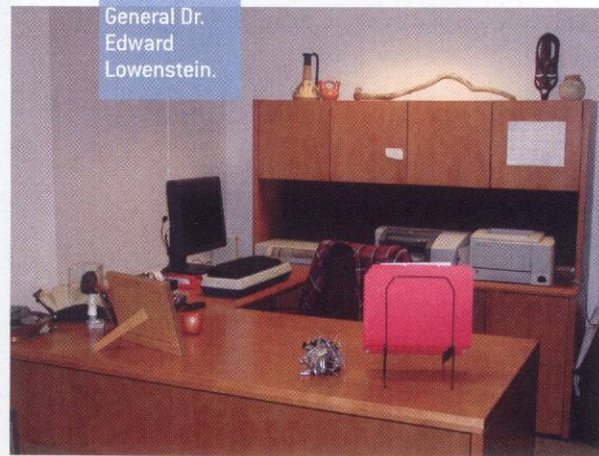
Matties has set up containers for pens, Mom's stuff, Dad's stuff, electronic stuff (such as those ever-multiplying AC adapter plugs), stuff that needs attention (a camera with undeveloped film, a tangled necklace), stuff to recycle, and stuff to toss out.

When they go through the many knick-knacks atop a dresser, Matties notices Adi smile at one photo. It's of a favorite friend. Another keeper.

Keep it or toss it

- Is it helping to get you where you need or want to go?
- Do you love it?
- Are you keeping it out of obligation?
- Are you keeping it out of indecision?
- How often do you use it?
- Could you recreate it?
- Could you get it from somewhere else?

Source: Michele Matties



Matties takes care not to seem pushy, but she steadily brings out new boxes to sort through. She gently prods Adi to "review" her possessions for their "relative" value, asking her to consider what she will still care about five or 10 years from now.

Adi has collected scores of souvenir T-shirts, most of which she outgrew long ago. Matties suggests turning them into a quilt or pillow cases, and Adi's eyes light up at the idea.

They have been at it for three hours when it's time for lunch. I ask Adi how she feels about downsizing. "I think it's cleansing," she says.

ADI HAD PARTED with a total of 28 bags and boxes of stuff—18 for charity, five for recycling, and five for the trash—as of the time this article went to press.

"I felt fabulous in working with her because she really listened to recommendations and had a little bit of faith as well," Matties says in an interview later. She just absorbed all the direction I gave her on this.

CONTINUED > 53

HOME CONTINUED FROM > 36

That was exciting for me."

It doesn't always go so smoothly. "A lot of people have not learned skill sets around organizing," Matties says. She gets calls from parents who see their own disorganized behavior in their children. "All of a sudden it dawns on them that this is the legacy that they're passing on." She helps them establish ground rules for their children that may be as basic as coats belong in the closet, not on the floor; boots in a boot bin; and the mail in a box on the hall table.

The 43-year-old Long Island native says as a child she had good role models in her mother and grandmother. And she had strong incentive to be organized. She loved doing things—sports, theater, chorus, student government, delivering the newspaper, volunteer activities—and knew she'd be reined in if she didn't get good grades.

In her late teens, she was diagnosed with Graves' Disease, a disorder in which the thyroid goes into overdrive, accelerating her heart rate. She suffered from sleeplessness, fatigue, memory loss, and trouble concentrating. Her symptoms were so severe she required surgery. The experience, she says, left her better able to appreciate the challenges faced by those with focusing problems such as Attention Deficit Disorder. "Sometimes people feel very alone in their challenge," she says, "and they don't have to be."

With all her clients, she says, she takes note of their strengths and weaknesses, their different learning styles. Some may be more visual;



When Matties gets back to her house, she sorts clients' surplus stuff for recycling.

"People create so much process around organizing that they can't get to the organizing."

—Michele Matties

others may require step-by-step instructions. And Matties must stay attuned to the "different ways people connect to things." She offers the simple example of labeling a client's files. If she labels one for "autos," but the client thinks of vehicles as "cars," he'll never find it in an alphabetized drawer.

Clients also differ in how involved they want to become in the organization process. While Adi wanted to be present throughout, her 16-year-old sister, Carolyn, was willing to let Matties and her mother do the initial sorting.

One situation Matties won't accept is when she feels "dumped on." When clients appear less invested in the cause than she is, she will tell them: "If this doesn't matter, then I don't belong here."

The fee—organizers charge from \$60 to \$200 an hour—should help focus clients' attention. Matties's high-end is for such services as advising clients on maximizing space when remodeling, say, a kitchen.

BESIDES HELPING PEOPLE manage things, Matties helps them manage time. She recommends "chunking" similar tasks together. She persuaded a lawyer, who used to leave phone calls to the end of the day, to make them first thing

and leave messages detailing the information he wants; as a result, he often gets his answers by afternoon. She tells of a real estate agent whose outgoing phone message specifies the times she returns calls, relieving her of the pressure of making them immediately. Similarly, Matties advises clients to alert colleagues of the times they read and respond to e-mail. She says it can take up to 15 minutes to get back on task after a phone or e-mail interruption.

Technophobes hire Matties to organize their e-mail boxes to file messages automatically, so that a bulletin from the boss doesn't get lost among the spam. She also can set up financial software for tracking expenses and paying bills electronically.

Whatever she's organizing, Matties aims to keep it simple. "People create so much process around organizing that they can't get to the organizing," she says. For example, she scoffs at color-coded filing systems, when plain manila files will do just fine. "What happens when you run out of yellow? The stumbling block is the system."

VERNIMEN SAYS that she likes to think of herself as an organized person, especially on the job. But at home, she acknowledges, it has been a different story. "Frankly I think my kids are way more organized than I am," she says. "My kids always call me on procrastination." She points to the irony of telling them: "You're like 13, why are you saying those things to me? I'm supposed to be saying those things to you." She credits Matties with helping her change. Being able to "actually find things [is] a great stress reliever," she says.

While Matties cleaned out her drawers and organized her papers and jewelry, she left the closet to Vernimen. "I think she sensed it was something I needed to do myself," Vernimen says. But she needed Matties to help her get over the guilt of tossing clothes that no longer fit or had gone out of style, to accept that "it's time to leave all those things behind."

Well, not quite everything. Vernimen admits slipping a bit when she saw what Adi was tossing. "I would see things that were thrown in the trash and see a doll. I would say, 'Not Molly!'"

To which Matties sternly responded: "Put it back in the bag." ■

Overwhelmed by memorabilia?

- Take snapshots of sentimental things, then toss them. Place the pictures in a digital scrapbook with journal entries describing why they're important to you.
- Digitize your photos and buy digital frames for easy access to them.
- Turn your keepsakes into wall art by arranging them on display shelves.
- Stretch colorful T-shirts over cork tiles that can be mounted on the wall.
- Turn T-shirts into a quilt or throw pillows.

Source: Michele Matties

Michele Matties's Web site is noworriesorganizing.com