

ARCHIVE

Bolton's Carol Ehrlich is a professional organizer

Julia Quinn-Szcesuil/bolton@cnc.com

Published 11:01 p.m. ET Dec. 8, 2010 | Updated 8:21 a.m. ET Dec. 9, 2010

Years of constant travel in her role as a management consultant finally wore Carol Ehrlich out. So she merged her work experience as a consultant, her interpersonal skills as a licensed nurse, and her love of organizing into a new business.

Ehrlich enjoys challenges — from organizing an office to helping hoarders. She is always mindful of the complicated emotions surrounding a person's possessions. But don't be afraid of Ehrlich — she is not going to notice a messy kitchen table if it does not bother you.

"I explain to people that this is not about what I want, it is about you and what you want," said Ehrlich. "I am not here to pass judgment."

Even Ehrlich, who functions better when things are organized, has one room in her house that can just stay messy. In her spare time, this Bolton Artisans Guild member works with fabric, creating fabric bowls and other art items. Her craft room is designated as the one room she doesn't have to clean up if she does not want to.

Contact Ehrlich by calling 978-779-5439 or e-mail at ce35@cornell.edu or online at boltonorganizingandstaging.com.

Q Are you a naturally organized person?

A Yes. I am convinced that I was born knowing how to organize. I definitely inherited the organizing gene directly from my mom.

Part of the joke is that I was born late so in my mind I made up a story that I wasn't quite ready — I had a few more things to sort out.

Q So this is life long?

A I was the kid whose room was always neat because I thought that was a fun thing. When I was an adult, friends or co-workers or family would come to the house and say, “Your house is so organized. Can you come help me organize my house?” And I said, “Absolutely, I would love to.” I never thought about doing it for payment; it was just for fun.

As I got older, people would say, “Gee, I am getting ready to put my house on the market. Would you help me get it organized and looking proper so when I am getting ready to sell it will be easier?”

This was even before home staging was a profession.

Q But this has not been your career until recently.

A My whole professional career was management and organizational consulting. It is called change management.

If someone initiates a change on their own, say they want to lose 20 pounds, that is really hard, but they asked for the change. But what if some third party said, “You must lose 20 pounds in the next three weeks or you are going to be fired.” That is totally different.

So I have learned pretty quickly how to have people be comfortable with me so they can explain to me what is motivating them and what is not motivating them and what is standing in the way of their doing this new thing.

Q How do you do that with individuals?

A The effort and the thought that goes into it is the same as what I do now which is helping people go from point A to point B and helping them change so they can move forward.

Q The emotions must run high when you organize people’s stuff. How do you navigate that?

A A lot of organizing is what I call bins and boxes. It is the physical and the logistics. But there is a lot of emotion involved for some people.

Hoarders are very emotional about the fact that they have collected so many things. You can’t work with a hoarder and act as if they are someone who happens to have a large collection of toy cars. It is totally different.

Q You work with a whole spectrum.

A I work with people who I call ordinary, run-of-the-mill clients who just have too much stuff. When I say ordinary, it is not a huge emotional [job].

Then I help people when they are moving or downsizing and then it gets emotional. I help when people are moving to assisted living or a nursing home or have lost a loved one. Same thing — it is a huge deal and very emotional.

So you are there to do a physical job, but they need emotional care too. It is a time of crisis for them.

Q You said your nursing helps your work now.

A I can't cure someone with a hoarding tendency. I can't cure someone with ADD, but I can really help them live with and manage their conditions so they can be more comfortable, be happier, have better relationships, whatever it is they are trying to do.

[As a nurse] I worked with people who were grieving or dying or who had conditions. I learned how to help people make decisions, how to motivate people to do something they didn't want to do. It all started with nursing.

Q Are clients nervous?

A I try to make things as easy for the client as possible. If I know what they are trying to do, I can best help them figure out how to get there.

I don't ever try to talk someone into what I think because it is about what they need. I'll say, "What is your budget? What is your time frame?"

Q What do you hope to bring to people when you work with them?

A I hope they will maintain whatever they have just accomplished. I'd like them to feel like they have skills and abilities they didn't have before and to help other people.

On a good day, people learn things. On a banner day, they take what they have learned and do something with it.