

GARAGE MAKEOVER

If a car's broken, call a mechanic. If it won't fit in the garage, call an organizer

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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE
Earlier versions of this story incorrectly spelled the name of Mary Elkind.

The one-car garage attached to Mary Elkind's Arlington brick rambler was so stacked with stuff, there was no room to park her nice new Toyota Prius. Her hybrid garage was one half bikes and garden supplies; other half junk she never uses. So she called in an expert Pierrette Ashcroft, a Washington professional organizer and productivity coach, to work with her.

PHOTOS BY KATHERINE FREY FOR
THE WASHINGTON POST



Mary Elkind's garage had become a sorry space crammed with things she wanted to forget.

The one-car garage attached to her Arlington brick rambler was stacked to the ceiling with clothing, dog crates and sofas. There was no room to park her new Prius. Each day as Elkind left and entered her house through her garage, she navigated a treacherous path, dodging piles of tools, Halloween costumes and unopened boxes moved there when she divorced and downsized three years ago.



Homeowner
Mary Elkind

"There's a lot of emotional baggage for me in acknowledging I no longer need a lot of this stuff," said Elkind, a part-time accountant. "I needed to get a handle on this."

She hired **Pierrette Ashcroft**, a Washington professional organizer and productivity coach, to work with her to let go of things she would never use again and create a system for storing what was left. The purging would make way for the Prius to occupy its rightful place indoors before cold weather arrived.



Organizer
Pierrette Ashcroft

When they were finished, Elkind's go-to possessions, such as bikes, ladders and tools, would be hanging on the walls of the garage. Everything else would be arranged on shelves lining the perimeter. The two worked on the makeover for a combined 50 hours over an eight-day period.

"Every time I got tired and sat down, Pierrette would bring me another box to sort and gave me encouragement," said Elkind.



Homeowner Mary Elkind unveils the garage project for professional organizer Pierrette Ashcroft.

The garage, like the attic and the basement, is our dumping ground for everything we don't know what to do with. You know: that busted fan, the pink paint you used in the nursery and the oak table that needs refinishing. Unlike these other utility spaces, however, a garage is a part of everyday life and, when the door opens, exposed for all to see. Garages are where we store those towering cases of water, paper towels or cat food we hoard in case of a shortage.

The whole mess is exacerbated by the phenomenon organizers have dubbed "multiples." Can't find your hammer? Buy another. Ashcroft unearthed five flashlights in Elkind's garage.

In the Washington region, you can find a range of garages, from the suburban three-car variety to one-car wood structures on urban alleys. For Ashcroft, garages are the second most requested job; the first is organizing papers. "I love doing garages because you pull everything out into the driveway and have lots of space to sort it out," she said.

That is how she and Elkind began. They dragged out skateboard helmets, dehumidifiers, a leg brace and some limp Beanie Babies. Out came a stack of shoe boxes being saved to use for dioramas. There were surprises, too: the ashes of Darla, the family's Bernese mountain dog who died in 2006.

It was hard to part with her grown daughters' dress-up trunk and a table that belonged to her parents. But she let them go, as well as the purse she carried on her wedding day. "Your whole life flashes before your eyes," Elkind said as she tossed an Al Green cassette into a trash bag.



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Pierrette Ashcroft, a professional organizer, moves quickly as she empties the garage, placing items in separate piles in the driveway to be organized.

A few hours later, 10 piles were forming: trash, donate, home improvement, sports equipment, camping, wine, pets, garden, storage containers and the “action” pile of shoes to be repaired and bulbs to be planted. After five sweaty hours, it was time to call **123 Junk**. For \$375, a truck made two deliveries: to the **Chantilly Habitat ReStore** and the **Fairfax County Transfer Station**. Ashcroft scheduled a second session in two days. Elkind’s homework was to keep sorting.

The costs of garage reorganization are supplies and fees. Ashcroft charges \$65 an hour or offers discounted prepaid packages. Because Elkind had containers and shelving, she bought only ladder hooks, wall anchors and clear plastic shoe boxes.

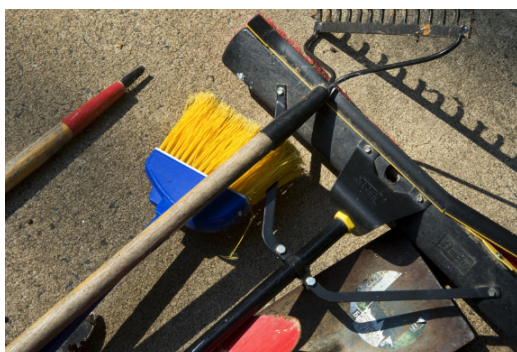
She splurged on a \$564 metal **Craftsman** tool cart.

There are other choices for garage redos using products made by companies such as **Gladiator GarageWorks** and Rubbermaid. Custom closet companies including Waldorf’s **Closet Factory** build cabinet systems, which start at \$1,200. Peter Belman, general manager of **GarageTek** in Washington, said its full-scale refurbishments that turn garages into multi-use rooms are \$10,000 to \$12,000.

No matter how you choose to reorder your garage, it’s going to take some serious sorting and decision-making



Professional organizer, Pierrette Ashcroft removes one of four ladders from Elkind’s garage.



Tools (left) are separated into a pile in the driveway.

Professional organizer, Pierrette Ashcroft (right) carries a Christmas tree to one of the piles in the driveway.



about what you can part with and where it should end up.

Elkind took pet supplies to a shelter and chemicals to a hazardous materials disposal site. “You can’t obsess on giving the item to the perfect place,” said Ashcroft. “Do the best you can, but get it out of your house.”

Last week, Elkind drove into her garage for the first time, parked and walked around her Prius to reach the door leading inside. She said she felt “energized.”

“I can’t believe I put it off for so long,” she said. “I learned the hard part is not the physical labor; it’s the mental part.”



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Mary Elkind’s overhauled garage allows her enough room to park her car and enough organization to quickly find what she’s looking for.

How to start

Thinking about organizing your garage? Here are some guidelines to remember as you de-clutter:

1. Before you begin, resolve to keep only things you use on a regular basis and to set up a system for keeping them orderly.



Hammers and mallets are arranged in a tool chest. Organizers call it “multiples” when a person buys another hammer or flashlight because the original is lost in the clutter.

2. Gather boxes and trash bags for categorizing things to be given away, sold, recycled or thrown out.

3. Store as many items off the floor as possible.

4. Keep the things you use most often, such as gardening supplies and sports equipment, in front and at eye level.

5. Avoid cardboard boxes. Clear plastic containers are a much better storage option because of fluctuations in humidity and temperature.



A place for everything and everything in its place: ladders, gardening tools and sporting equipment on the wall.

6. Consider giving the floor a makeover. Concrete cleaners can remove gunk, and durable paints will give a fresh look. Or install vinyl floor mats or an industrial coating.

7. Don't expect to do it all in one day, or even over a weekend. If you get help from your family, a friend (a really, really good friend) or a professional organizer, the job will move faster.

8. Having a yard sale is often not worth it. **Craigslist** and **eBay.com** have brought prices down for most used items. Sell items of value online, offer them through **Freecycle** or donate them.