

## Simple steps turn garage from unusable to organized

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Bob Fleckenstein has developed a keen awareness of cluttered garages.

He says he'll drive past houses in his neighborhood and catch a glimpse when somebody leaves the garage door open. He notices a lot of people who share his former predicament -- a pressing need to get organized.

Over the past several weeks, the Mt. Lebanon salesman has tackled one of life's most dreaded home chores -- cleaning out the garage -- and he admits it wasn't easy.

Fortunately, he didn't have to venture alone into the "black hole," thanks to professional organizers Leslie McKee of Organize ME, and Patty Kreamer of Kreamer Connect Inc. The women are members of Pittsburgh Professional Organizers, a specialized group that meets regularly to exchange ideas, referrals and product resources.

Photo Gallery



Professional organizers clear the garage



Before the organizers stepped in, Fleckenstein's garage had served many purposes, he says, except the one for which it was intended -- parking the car. There simply wasn't enough room to pull it in.

The floor had become a catchall for everything from work supplies to golf equipment to gardening tools.

"I wasn't using the space because I thought I couldn't use it," Fleckenstein says. "It was not functional to me. I even had stuff from the people who owned the house before me.

"They didn't use the garage, either."

Because his job involves travel, Fleckenstein uses his Jeep to store sales materials when he's on the road. When he came home on weekends, "I'd throw all the stuff on the garage floor. I had to step over it to take the garbage out," he says.

Fleckenstein's situation is shared by many people, according to a new survey by Impulse Research Corp. of Los Angeles, a public opinion and marketing research firm. The results indicate that while more than half (52 percent) of American homeowners feel it's important to have a garage in "top" condition, 24 percent of those surveyed admit being embarrassed to leave their garage door open because of the junk inside.

McKee says most people think of their garages as a storage locker rather than as a parking space for one or more vehicles. "They're paying a mortgage to protect one of their biggest investments -- their car -- and they leave it outside to withstand the elements," she says. "They're being inconvenienced on a daily basis."

The first step the professionals took in organizing Fleckenstein's garage was to determine which belongings "deserved" to stay and what had to be thrown away. He admits he needed some gentle persuasion to start getting rid of things.

"There's convincing involved when you're doing a project like this," he says. "They'd say, 'Do you really need this?' and when I'd say, 'Yes,' they'd ask, 'Why?'"

"Then I'd try to make up excuses why I needed the garbage. After shuffling around, it all went to the curb."

McKee says the biggest improvements in the garage were three 6-foot customized cabinets with doors installed by Dean Pogas of Keep It Neat, a garage organizing firm in Sarver, Butler County. Pogas is a local representative for Garage Storage Cabinets, a company in Stillwater, Okla.

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McKee says the cabinets, made of furniture-grade particleboard, are designed to hang 10 inches above the floor, suspended on a steel railing secured to the block wall. Because garage floors are poured at a sloping angle for drainage, he says, the hanging system allows doors to close smoothly, drawers to slide easily and cabinets to hang straight.

One cabinet is 24 inches deep to store business papers, and two are 16 inches deep -- one unit to accommodate golf clubs, shoes and golf balls, and the other for automotive and gardening supplies.

He also built a 6-foot workbench with drawers and bins underneath for storage. He estimates that the project cost about \$700, which included the cabinets, shipping of materials and installation. Other improvement costs were minimal, McKee says. A pegboard (about \$6) was installed behind the workbench, and hooks (\$10 or less) were purchased to lift two bicycles off the floor.

McKee affixed a heavy Styrofoam "fun noodle" (\$5 or less) to the side wall so the homeowner's parked Jeep doesn't scrape it when he opens the car door. A tennis ball on a string hangs from the ceiling to help park the car in the right spot, and there's a piece of Velcro on the ceiling for when the ball gets in the way.

She also installed an 8-foot-long metal bar with brackets (\$9) immediately inside the garage door to the right so Fleckenstein could easily find his rakes, shovels and broom.

Fleckenstein already had a fluorescent light fixture that he used to replace a plain light bulb on the ceiling, and he painted the block walls beige on the bottom half and white on the top half. He says the paint and the new lighting "really brightened things up. It was always so dark in there."

Kraemer says a major part of the project involved "removing things that didn't belong in the garage." She estimates that it took 20 to 30 hours to get rid of the clutter and reorganize the space.

"We found alternate places for a lot of things," McKee says.

She adds that it is typical for broken household items to end up in the garage. "We said, 'Either fix it, or throw it.'" For example, Fleckenstein was storing signs from a past golf outing, "and he said he might need them someday," she says. "We decided he didn't need them."

Often, people just need motivation from someone else to help them get organized, McKee says. "This is a very smart, successful, capable young guy," she says of her client. "He just needed another set of eyes. He knew what he needed to do -- he just needed someone to help him make decisions."

She says she feels her organizing services shouldn't be considered a luxury -- they are a necessity to clear clutter from busy lives. "Everything in a house needs to flow and move," she says. "When I go into a house, I can see where there's a jam. We're there to unclog it -- like a plumber."

Kraemer says there are certain "peak times" to her profession, when people realize it's time to take action. Back-to-school season is one time -- "Even if you don't have a child in school, you feel like starting again." New Year's and the April 15 income tax deadline are other dates when people feel the need to get organized.

And for those who still need a reason to take action, Kraemer says, Oct. 5 through 11 is Get Organized Week, an annual effort by the National Association of Professional Organizers to celebrate the benefits of simplicity in our lives.

As for Fleckenstein, he's delighted with his "new" garage.

"I'm thrilled with the results," he says. "It's a dramatic change." He estimates the cost of the project to be between \$800 to \$1,000.

"I was a little iffy about whether I wanted to do it," he says. "But after seeing the space I have now, it was well worth it. Now I'm starting to do some organizing in other parts of my house."