Professional organizer sets things straight

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We're all haunted by them.

The leaning tower of unpaid bills. The two-car garage you'd be lucky to squeeze a clown car into. The closet you can only enter after strapping on an avalanche beacon.

The *junk drawer*.

But Shannon Ronald, '99, urges you to come out of the cluttered closet.

"I've been there – I've had the bounced check, the piles of papers and clothes – so I'm not scandalized by them," says Ronald, a Tacoma-based professional organizer. "And consistently, every client thinks theirs is the worst job I've ever had. But I've already seen the worst. You can't shock me."

Combining fierce organizational skills, a non-judgmental eye and a hair-trigger sense of humor, Ronald has found mid-life success in the burgeoning field of professional organizing. Be it designing a budget, making sense of the attic or spinning shoeboxes of photos into personalized scrapbooks, Ronald calls herself the happiest when creating order out of the chaos of others.

"Everybody needs a system," she says. "And helping someone design a system is always about more than filing and storing – it's about helping them come to a place where they can live simply and with relief. Where they can relax."

The shift to professional organization from Ronald's lifelong amateur status ("I was the child in the family who cleaned out all the drawers and closets," she laughs) came a year ago, when the graduate of Seattle University's Not-For-Profit Leadership program found herself contemplating life after seven years as executive director of the L'Arche Tahoma Hope Community.

Following nearly two decades with the organization that provides homes for people with developmental disabilities, Ronald says she recognized her readiness for a change, but a meaningful one – the answer, as she says, to "those questions that come to you when you turn 40."

With a background in finance and meeting coordination and an interest in helping people inventory, Ronald found her abilities well suited to professional organization – where the psychology underlying a mess can be infinitely more complicated than the tidying.

"There's a lot more to disorganization than simply letting the house get cluttered or getting behind on the bills," she says. "At some point, things fall into chaos, and what I try to look at is the psychology of how thing got that way – which can be anything from someone's personal style to a need to accumulate things to an unwillingness to let things go."

Ronald now balances her time between business (including home business) and residential organization, serving an average of eight clients at any given time and working with each client anywhere from three hours (setting up a filing system, getting finances in order) to 20 weeks (organizing an entire office). While empathy and the ability to listen are on-the-job requisites, Ronald says that when it comes to exposing their private disarray to a complete stranger, it's confidentiality that clients appreciate most.

I'm very humbled that people literally invite me into their closets and finances – the exact places that are shame areas for so many of us," she says. "People tell me, 'I never really talk about this,' or, 'My husband doesn't know we're belly up,' so assuring clients that everything I see remains confidential is incredibly important."

Filed under "Worst Job Ever," she says, would be the house she was hired to organize "that you could only walk through via a narrow passage" – a caricatured example of the desperation point many clients reach before calling for help.

Ronald's advice to anyone seeking a little more order in life?

"Have a place for everything – whether it's a filing system, how you take your phone messages, where you put mail or keep the pots and pans – and make sure everyone in the household knows where that place is," she says. "If everyone's working toward that same goal, you're already on your way."