

THIS WEEK IN REAL LIFE

COMING SUNDAY

Part 2 of our field to table series: potatoes

COMING SUNDAY

How southern France is dealing with a glut of grapes

COMING SUNDAY

When in Rome, eat as the Romans do

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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2006 C12

VITALS

Sure, blame the dog

FAMILY HEALTH • The shedding and chewing of shoes may be the least of the family dog's transgressions.

Asthmatic children who lived with dogs coughed more, produced more phlegm and had more bronchial responses to air pollutants than those with no pets, or those who lived only with cats, according to research that appeared last week in Environmental Health Perspectives.

Dr. Rob McConnell, a professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California and the study's lead author, speculated the increased asthmatic response of children with dogs is due to higher levels of endotoxin — a part of the cell wall of certain bacteria commonly found in dirt. Endotoxins are known to produce inflammation of the lungs and can be tracked in by dogs from outside.

But McConnell cautioned there might be other explanations for the study's findings. Children with dogs, for example, might be more likely to play outside and thus be more exposed to air pollution.

— Los Angeles Times

Baby formula goes organic

NEW PRODUCT • Organic foods have officially gone mainstream: President's Choice is bringing to market the first certified organic infant formula.

Yes, yes, breast milk is as organic as it gets, admits the company. But for situations where parents want another healthy option, PC Organics Infant Formula Plus (\$24.99 for a 730-gram container at The Real Canadian Superstore) offers a baby-boosting combination of natural ingredients that includes protein, minerals, fats and carbohydrates.

The formula for newborn to 12-month-old babies is iron fortified and includes Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids — two ingredients found in breast milk that help brain, eye and language development.

The formula is certified by an independent third party to make sure it meets organic standards and is produced according to organic agriculture principles.

Visit www.presidentschoice.ca for more information.

— Trent Edwards, Calgary Herald

Chili cook-off blasting off

COMPETITION • Calling all chili cooks. The Canadian Championship Chili Cook-Off will be held Saturday in Calgary.

More cooks are still welcome to compete in the day-long event outside Boston Pizza in Country Hills (600-388 Country Hills Blvd. N.E.). Cash prizes will be awarded to winners in each of three categories: red chili, chili verde (green) and salsa. Winners can also compete in the world championships in Omaha, Neb., Oct. 14 to 16.

The public is welcome to come for samples anytime after about 11 a.m. A toonie buys a tasting cup for unlimited sampling.

Call 226-2258 for more information, or e-mail patras47@yahoo.ca.

— Robin Summerfield, Calgary Herald



BEFORE



AFTER



Photos, Brett Beadle, Calgary Herald
Professional organizer Shannon Grams, above, helped clear clutter and establish order to writer Kim Heinrich Gray's upstairs work area.

Overwhelmed by your life?

It may be time to bring in a professional organizer

KIM HEINRICH GRAY
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

“Do you mind if I take a peek?” asks the near stranger I’ve just invited into my home.

“Not at all,” I reply, surprised by her brazenness. I mean, she’s barely walked in the door.

Truthfully, I’m mortified. You see, Shannon Grams is a professional personal organizer. What’s more, she has sharpened her gaze and is heading straight for the family art cupboard — not exactly the tidiest corner of my domain.

“Mmmmm,” she hums musically as she swings open the cabinet door and peers inside. I’m crushed. This cupboard is my constant challenge, because as much as our two children enjoy doing art, they despise the thought of throwing their masterpieces away.

Grams, herself a mother of three, is met with several crammed shelves of acrylic paints, dried-up glue bottles, dishevelled paintbrushes and related debris. She stifles a smile and politely closes the door.

“Let’s head upstairs,” I suggest, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. I want to direct her to the loft that is the reason I invited her over in the first place.

The loft. Our top floor. One of the reasons we bought our home. The loft would be a home office. An adult space. A place for creating, shared between husband and wife. A respite from the domesticity that dictates almost all other aspects of our home. A place where we could write, entertain guests with cocktails (the “loftini” as we initially referred to it) and play music.

This, at least, was the plan. Five years have passed and the loft, though it functions as an office, has turned into a dumping ground for all of the paperwork we don’t want cluttering the main floor. A place where we stash and pile books, photographs, correspondence, keepsakes. In other words, the loft is not the tranquil space we imagined.

Frankly, the very thought of having to organize the loft puts me in a state of hysterical paralysis.

Grams’ phone number was recently handed to me during a conversation about this very fact.

“Call her,” I was advised. “She’ll whip you into shape.”

So here I am, feeling vulnerable, but ready, finally, to address what has become a sore point in our household. I am standing in the middle of this mess with a woman (she charges \$40 an hour, by the way) who I am convinced has

already judged me as organizationally challenged, if not worse.

Grams takes a deep breath, sighs and begins to poke around the room.

“Am I hopeless?” I ask, preparing for a lecture on the virtues of order.

She replies, looking directly into my eyes: “What I see here are deferred decisions. This is stuff you don’t want to deal with. Your loft is a sign of a busy life. You’re a mom. You run a home. You work part time. You’re a wife. You have a busy social life. Your focus is elsewhere. You leave what is not that important to the end. Then it becomes overwhelming. Then it doesn’t get done.”

I feel a sudden surge of reassurance.

Apparently her clientele is largely made up of women like me, which makes me immediately more comfortable.

Before long, the spirited Grams, a member of the Calgary chapter of the Professional Organizers of Canada, and I are swapping stories — all the while plowing through piles of magazines, newspapers and mail, and deciding what goes where.

After two three-hours sessions, I find myself sitting at my loft desk and writing this story. To my left is a desk organizer with 16 labelled (!) slots with a place for everything



GET ORGANIZED

September marks the beginning of the real new year, a time when all of our organizational skills are pressed to the max. To make the transition from summer to fall easier, we bring you a (short) week of stories:

TUESDAY: Clean out your closet
WEDNESDAY: Raid the pantry
THURSDAY: Get exercising
TODAY: Hire a pro

from envelopes to bank statements. My hundreds of photographs are neatly stacked, one against the other, in smart, black photo boxes. The hardwood floor shines from below and two stuffed white chairs sit, pristine, ready and waiting for conversation.

For the first time in five years, the loft is how we imagined it would be. I feel unspeakable relief.

“Women always want to hug me when I leave them,” Grams had laughed as she was leaving after her second and final visit. She said these words when I was bidding her farewell with an overly enthusiastic (and only slightly awkward) bear hug.

Of course, I plan to have this organizational diva back sometime this fall. The loftini experience has inspired me. And a certain art cupboard — not to mention other unmentionable corners of my busy domain — beckons.

10 tips from a personal organizer

Shannon Grams, a professional organizer, shares these ideas for taming the chaos in your home:

- Be faithful to the “one in, one out” rule. In other words, if you buy a book, find one you already own and pass it on to someone who could use it. If your child gets 15 birthday presents, find 15 old toys and donate them to places like The Children’s Cottage or a women’s shelter.
- Use space effectively. Consider shelving units when necessary.
- Make a bigger plan and break it into small pieces. Otherwise, organizing a large, cluttered space can seem overwhelming. “We often want to tackle it all,” says Grams. “Which isn’t realistic, so we get discouraged.”
- Don’t organize for more than two to three hours at a time. It’s physically and, especially when you’re sorting through personal affairs such as letters and photographs, mentally exhausting.
- Put like items together when you’re sorting. Then find appropriate containers to keep them localized. Don’t, for example, keep gift wrap in several locations throughout your house.
- Containerize (one of Grams’ favourite words). You need to have adequate containers or you end up with piles of stuff with nowhere to go.
- Don’t get involved with details during the first major sort. Save the minutiae for the second and third time round.
- Always have a donate box on the go, somewhere you can throw old clothing, shoes, books, art supplies. According to Grams, there are loads of needy people out there who can make use of your clutter. (She will transport your donations to the appropriate outlet if you need to rid your home of books, magazines, toys, clothes etc.)
- Maintain new systems. Put things away as soon as you’re finished with them. Process household items as part of your everyday routine.
- “Hire a personal organizer to do what they do best, so you can do what you do best,” says Grams.

Who you gonna call?

Here are some personal organizers in the Calgary area:

- Georgina Forrest
Smart Works! Organizing Services (business organizer)
615-4349
- Bonnie Fraser
Garage Boyz (specializes in garages)
701-2699
- Rhonda Gervais
Organizing Matters Inc. (residential, home offices, personal, business offices)
241-9040
www.organizingmatters.ca
- Shannon Grams
A Place For Everything (personal organizer)
998-8439
www.aplaceforeverything.com
- Debi Stephenson
Room2Organize (residential organizer)
652-6736
www.Room2Organize.com



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