

## Cover Story



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Professional organizer Mary Sommerlad finds all kinds of forgotten treasures in Nimitz School's shed. Sommerlad normally specializes in residential organization.

## Getting It Together: People are turning to professional organizers

By Anne Gelhaus

When Georgia Galassi recently volunteered to help clean out the storage shed at Nimitz Elementary School, she didn't know she'd find items dating back to when her two eldest sons, now in their 20s, were enrolled there.

"We threw out stuff from 1984," Galassi said.

She said the PTA and the school staff had been just throwing things in the shed for the last 20 years. "There was stuff crammed in all the way to the door."

Galassi, who owns and operates Georgia Organization and Design, undertook the March 11 cleanup along with other members of the National Association of Professional Organizers' Bay Area chapter. The Nimitz cleanup was the first South Bay project undertaken for NAPO's "Get Organized Month," which was actually in January.

"It's taken a little time to get a group of organizers together who wanted to work on projects in the South Bay," said Sherree Hellinger, educational director for NAPO's Bay Area chapter.

What has happened to the shed at Nimitz is not too different from what is happening in homes these days, which may have something to do with why there are such things as professional organizers.

According to Galassi, this new and burgeoning profession is a reflection of the times. "This is the first time in mankind's history that we've had so much stuff coming into the house," Galassi says.

First, there's the mail. "It used to be a letter or two from Grandma or a friend," she says. "Now we have two to three inches of advertisements, as well as a pile of bills for a variety of modern things—cable television, service agreements, credit cards." In fact, Galassi says NAPO members speculate that people get more mail in a week than their grandparents received in a lifetime.

And it isn't just the mail that's pouring in.

Children come home with things from everywhere they go. Doctors, dentists and schools all send home erasers, stickers and toys with the little tykes.

"I point all this out to my clients," Galassi says, "to help them feel better about the mess."

According to Galassi, the Bay Area NAPO chapter came about when four people who were into organizing stumbled across each other. They heard about the national organization, which had started in Los Angeles in 1985, and decided to start a chapter in the Bay Area. The four organizers called people they thought might be into similar work—shopping services, business consultants, designers and so on.

They hoped a dozen or so people would show up. Some 36 people came to their first meeting in 1988. Today the Bay Area chapter is the largest in the nation at 156 members. NAPO membership totals about 3,000 professional organizers in 20 chapters across the country.

There is no training for this work. And just now, NAPO is planning classes that will offer organizers certification.

These people just happen to love organizing.

Galassi says organizers work on basements, attics, just about anything.

But even though the profession is new, organizers are actually specializing. One member specializes in medical offices. Some work on estate sales.

Others like residential work. Some specialize in offices.

NAPO members network at national and regional conferences and meetings. "We all work together and support each other," said Mary Sommerlad, who heads up the South Bay NAPO Neighbors group. Sommerlad was one of the four people working at Nimitz.

"NAPO Neighbors come together once a month to answer questions and bounce [ideas] off each other," she says.

There's a lot of collaboration that goes on between members.

If one gets a job at an estate sale, they might call in another organizer who knows how to appraise items. Over email or by phone, an organizer might send out a "Do you want this job?" email to the members.

Galassi, who has a degree in psychology from Stanford University and is earning an interior design certificate from West Valley College, says her background is typical of many NAPO members.

"Most people are therapists who got interested when they saw how stuck people get when they can't let go of things," she says.

She asks her clients what their overall big goals are. Some just want to be able to find things. Some need a system to deal with incoming stuff. Some say they don't want to have to come home heartsick when they look around and see a mess everywhere.

And there are, of course, different levels of mess. NAPO rates hoarders on a scale of one to five. A level one is a person who hoards a few things, maybe shoes or plastic bags. A level five is someone who needs a therapist involved in the process and

maybe the county health department.

Finding things is a major benefit of being organized.

Galassi says one client had so many stacks of papers, magazines and mail around the house that the bills got lost. "Their electricity had been turned off," she says.

NAPO chapters generally select a nonprofit group as the beneficiary of their "GO Month" projects, but Galassi said the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the Nimitz community prompted her to see what her group could do for the school.

She suggested Nimitz to the local chapter for its community service project because "they don't get all the help they need. There's a large population of families from other countries, so it's hard to get the families involved." She says many of the immigrant families are working, taking English classes and simply trying to cope with their new culture and really can't help at school.

According to PTA president Susannah Vaughan, it's hard even for families who are involved at Nimitz to find the time to weed through the school community's possessions.

"We've had no opportunity to go through and sort things out," Vaughan said. "It was good to have Georgia there to crack the whip."

Galassi says that part of what her group wanted to accomplish was organizing the emergency supplies so the school would have easy access to them.

Once they got started, the organizers made quick work of the mess at Nimitz. They built shelves in the storage shed and sorted through the school's emergency supplies, as well as several decades' worth of possessions accumulated by the PTA.

"We got rid of about 5-10 percent of what was in there," Vaughan said afterward. "That doesn't sound like very much but, from the PTA's perspective, it was a great deal. Now we can grab a first-aid kit in the event of an emergency rather than going through a giant mountain of things."

"That's something that could be critical in the event of an emergency: to be able to access supplies quickly," agreed Nimitz principal Dale Jones.

Nimitz teachers also reaped the benefits of the NAPO cleanup. Organizers pulled Tupperware, small appliances, sandwich bags and condiments from the cabinets in the faculty kitchen and reassembled the contents in a more orderly fashion.

But that was a little difficult with teachers coming and going the whole time.

"We've kind of had to do a little bit of compromising because [the kitchen was]

being used at the time," said organizer Tamah Vega as teachers jostled with volunteers to get to the microwave.

Sommerlad, who specializes in residential organization, said Nimitz's kitchen was in fair shape compared to some of her clients' homes.

"We have what we call chronically disorganized people—the ones who have aisles [of clutter] in their house," she added.

Many people who hire professional organizers are in the process of moving or are handling a family member's affairs and have to figure out what to do with their possessions.

"Usually, what gets people wanting to get organized is something major happening in their lives," says Pam Miller, who specializes in organizing small businesses.

"The average person wants a helping hand for support. It's more fun to get organized with someone else."

"It's not hard to get unorganized these days with so much paper coming in," Sommerlad said. "You have to reorganize your thinking. Some people get stuck."

"They're too busy to take the time to get it done themselves," says Miller. She calls her service Simplify.

"It's not that they're not capable; they just need motivation," Vega said.

Vaughan said some of her friends would happily pay for this kind of advice.

"People get so involved in everyday life that they don't step back and look at the clutter they're accumulating," she says. "When someone comes in with new eyes, you see the clutter."

Still, Vaughan said she's not sure she'd hire an organizer for her personal possessions.

"I have things organized in a certain order that's my order. To everyone else, it's a mess," she added.

Principal Jones also balked at using a professional to get his office in order.

"I'm the kind of person who knows what pile everything's in," he said. "If it were too organized, I'd never be able to find anything."

For Vaughan, it's a control issue.

"I like to be in control of the clearing out. Georgia's good because she doesn't take control. She lets you do it."

The volunteers at Nimitz didn't set up anything so elaborate at the school, but Vaughan said it was the simple things, such as building shelves in the storage shed, that really helped.

"That's something that seems really obvious, but until someone comes along and suggests it, you don't do it," she says.

*NAPO organizers can be found at [www.napo-sfba.org](http://www.napo-sfba.org) or by calling 415.281.5681.*

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