

The Organizational Woman

After a career in health advocacy, **Penny Catterall** came up with a neat idea

By Ellen Bartlett



Penny Catterall shows off the "before" (right side) and "after" (left side) during one of her closet-organizing forays.

RYAN GIBSON

Penny Catterall sits comfortably cross-legged on the floor, digging through the contents of boxes she has just overturned: a jumbled pile of pens, fistfuls of pencils, erasers, buttons, Pokémon cards, blank business cards, permanent markers, glue sticks, glitter, an Ace bandage.

"You purge. You sort. You place." She intones it like a mantra. "This is going to be fun!"

Her client and friend, Michelle McNally, raises her eyebrows at the word *fun*, but she gamely joins in the sorting. McNally may not have Catterall's confidence in the process—not yet—but she does feel less hopeless than she did a year ago when, after receiving a laptop for her birthday, she had a horrible epiphany: There was no place to put it. The little room in the Bethesda house that serves as home office for her and homework central for her three kids was full. "I realized I needed help," she says.

She called Catterall. They've met three times. Progress is being made.

Slim, energetic and hyper-articulate, Catterall seems suited to her second career. Call it an unintended consequence of a personality quirk.

Her first career was as a health specialist, working in program and policy development with nonprofit advocacy groups.

Starting in 2000, she scaled back to spend more time with her sons, then 5 and 7. She continued health advocacy as an independent contractor but it wasn't a living, so she started branching out, somewhat at random. "I'm a manic knitter," she says. So she started selling knitted pieces and teaching knitting classes, which morphed into jewelry making. Running two home businesses, she could feel herself starting to

burn out. And to make matters worse, she was helping her mother clear out the family home in Washington, D.C. That's when it hit her.

"My friends kept telling me, 'You're so organized. Why don't you do this for a living?'"

It did seem perfect. "I love boxes and putting things away," Catterall says. "I go into friends' homes. I start sorting their kids' toys, color-coordinating their Legos. I can't help myself..."

"I've always needed to live in a controlled, orderly environment. That's just my personality."

She set out in the summer of 2009, predictably, in organized fashion. "I bought tons of books, watched videos, read blogs," she says. "It's overwhelming how much information there is on organizing. You actually have to organize the information you have on organizing."

She joined the National Association of Professional Organizers in late 2009, and formally registered her company, Order Your Life, as a business in the state of Maryland. In early 2010 she was up and running, working from her Bethesda home.

A year later, she has a roster of a dozen regular clients, paying \$40 to \$55 an hour for her help. "People are actually paying me to organize them when I'd do it for free." She stops and laughs.

She can do conventional organizing—rearrange furniture, de-clutter. "I can organize somebody's closet, help them organize their clothes by season and color," she says.

But "a lot of what I do is get people unstuck," she says. "It's moving people in the direction they want to be going in. It's motivating them to move forward."

When people call, "their lives are a jumble. ...Not only is their physical space disorganized, their mental space is disorganized," Catterall says. "They don't know how to start, and they don't know how to continue."

"I go into someone's home, and I'm working with them one on one. Some

people are really, really disorganized, and some people just need a little push in the right direction. I have been in houses..." She sighs. "You can't even open the door it's so crowded. ...You have to be very patient, nonjudgmental, you have to be able to put yourself in their shoes."

Catterall's propensity for organization may stem from being the daughter of a diplomat who was both a collector and a bit of a pack rat. She spent her childhood moving from one foreign posting to another: Mozambique, Ethiopia, Pakistan, South Korea, India.

"I have a visceral reaction against over-consumerism," she says. "...I believe too much stuff in our lives holds us back. ...Everybody wants to buy more and have more. And the more stuff we have, the more we're controlled by it. You can't just pick up and go."

At one extreme is the client who, in relocating, "paid movers to move her junk mail because she couldn't decide what to do with it," Catterall says.

At the other end are the small business owners and self-employed who work from home. She helps with organization, filing, finances, taxes. And sometimes other things, too. One client scheduled a meeting to discuss moving her business forward. When Catterall arrived, the woman said, "My son lost his phone. I need you to help me organize his room so we can find the phone." They didn't find the phone, "but we did find a lot of other stuff."

"My God, I've been looking for that everywhere!" is what Catterall most likes to hear.

"It's not going to make me big bucks," she says. "But I'm happy doing it and I'm earning, and right now that's enough." ■

Ellen Bartlett lives in Chevy Chase and edits Applause, the publication for The Music Center at Strathmore published by Bethesda Magazine. To comment on this story, e-mail comments@bethesdamagazine.com.