

# Routines that can restore order to a chaotic household

## Simple ways to keep a home in drop-in shape

By Dan Rafter  
Special to the Tribune

Giselle Heimann Ratain began changing her ways five years ago, after her then 9-year-old son unexpectedly invited a friend to her home in Chicago.

The friend, along with his mother, stayed for dinner that night—also a surprise. Ratain prepared her meal the way she did most evenings, searching through a series of drawers and cupboards until she found whatever she needed: a spatula in one drawer, a pepper shaker in a cupboard on the other side of the kitchen or a knife in another drawer on the opposite end of the room.

"I was looking for things all over the kitchen," Ratain said. "I wasn't sure where I was going to find the serving things. I wasn't sure where the spices were. It took me a bit of searching to find whatever I needed."

Ratain's guest then made a suggestion: "You know what you really need? You need to hire an organization consultant."

Ratain took her guest's advice, hiring a professional organizer. Now, she and her husband, Mark, an oncologist/clinical pharmacologist at the University of Chicago, don't panic when someone drops by at the last minute.

Ratain is even able to keep up, for the most part, with the messes left behind by her two sons, 14-year-old Bruce and 6-year-old Jonathan. When a friend calls and says she'll be stopping by in five minutes, Ratain doesn't have to scramble through her house tossing piles of toys in closets or shoving stacks of magazines out of sight.

Ratain doesn't suffer from CHAOS, a syndrome that is common to many other homeowners. Coined by author, speaker and ant clutter specialist Marla Cilley, better known as "the FlyLady" because of her love of fly-fishing, CHAOS stands for "Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome."

And why can't homeowners have anyone stop by unexpect-



Photos for the Tribune by Michael Walker  
Mark Drexler plays chess with sons Aaron and Coby. Sarah Drexler (background), playing with daughter Rikki, says hiring an organizer was a smart move to keep her home neat.

edly? Because old newspapers take up valuable sitting space, unfinished craft projects hog the kitchen table, unmailed letters suck up counter space or scattered children's toys crowd the living-room floor.

Homeowners facing such clutter are too embarrassed to have anyone over. And when someone wants to stop by unexpectedly they either panic, rush madly through the house hiding as much mess as possible or make an excuse to stop the last-minute visit.

But Cilley, along with other home-organization specialists, says that life doesn't have to be this way, even for the busiest of homeowners.

"Clutter is the obstacle," said Cilley, who can be found in the tiny town of Brevard in North Carolina or on the Internet at [www.flylady.net](http://www.flylady.net). "When we were children, my mother would drag us every Sunday afternoon to visit people. You'd just show up at Aunt Sarah's house, and she'd let you in because her house was always in order. That wouldn't happen today. We don't dare drop in on anyone without warning because of the fear we have of someone dropping in on us."

Cilley wrote her popular book

"Sink Reflections" (Bantam, \$14.95) partly to address this fear. It—like her Web site—contains practical advice on how homeowners, with just a little bit of time, can keep their homes in guest-ready shape.

"Evict the clutter," Cilley said. "He's a squatter. He steals time and energy. He wants all this attention. It gets to the point where he says, 'Deal with me.' You feel so guilty about it, you don't know where to start. The truth is, you just have to toss it out on its ear. It's actually really easy. Once you start tossing it, it becomes addictive."

Cilley's message seems to be growing in popularity. Her Web site boasted 168,000 members as of January, pretty strong numbers for one that is only 2 years old.

Cilley advises homeowners to start their de-cluttering process by taking everything off their kitchen counters, and then only return the items they really use. That bread machine you haven't touched in three months? Stick it in the cupboard. That toaster oven? Same thing.

Laura Ashman, a professional organizer and owner of Skokie-based Home and Office CPR, which stands for Clutter Prob-

lems Resolved, says that most clutter problems result because homeowners fail to take the second or two necessary to put items in their proper spaces. This is how one catalog on the kitchen table grows to five catalogs, three magazines, six pieces of junk mail and two old newspapers.

"It's important to be diligent about putting things away," Ashman said. "There is a place for everything, and everything should be in its place. If you come home from work and throw your mail on the table in the foyer for a couple of days, eventually the table looks messy. If you'd instead put it in the home office where you will address it, then the house doesn't get as messy. If you don't know where something should go, a good rule is to put like things together. For example, if a child comes home and wants patches sewn on something, put the patches where you keep the sewing stuff instead of on the kitchen counter."

Ashman also recommends that homeowners clean up as much as possible before they go to bed. The evening is actually a good time to clean and organize, Ashman said, because the children are in bed, and the rest of

the day's tasks are completed.

"Most people have very full days now," Ashman said. "We all live very full days. Try to find time before you go to sleep in the evening to do a walk-through of your house. Is everything put away? I have three kids and sometimes I'm tired at the end of the day. But the reality is, you won't have time to do this in the morning. Say you want to empty the dishwasher in the morning. Things will happen. You have to get the kids off to school, you get distracted, and it doesn't get done. In the evening, things are more quiet."

Caroline Ash, a professional organizer based in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood, says there are no "earth-shattering" tips for keeping a house in drop-in shape. Most of what she and other planners can provide, she said, are common-sense tips.

She recommends bags, clothes baskets and storage bins for homeowners short on cleaning time. Homeowners can use these to quickly stow away toys, books or laundry.

Ash isn't surprised that so many homeowners struggle with the challenge of keeping their homes organized.

"When we were young, my mother didn't work. She was always there to handle things. But today, wives and husbands both work. They have to actually set

aside time to keep the house clean and keep it picked up. Sometimes that's a challenge. But if you don't set aside this time, it can get away from you," Ash said.

Elaine Quinn, a professional organizer and owner of Chicago's Space Craft Organizing Services, says that children can play a key role in keeping a home in guest-ready condition. When children reach a certain age, they, too, can help by learning to put away their toys, coloring books and clothing.

"You have to develop this as a habit in children," Quinn said. "It's a great way to raise children. When you do have children, it tends to be difficult to keep a house tidy. But children will imitate adults. If you show them that you put things away, they'll pick up on it. You can even make it into a game. Children can think of putting things away as a game."

Homeowners should also remember that keeping a house in order doesn't mean keeping it immaculate 24 hours a day.

"People should remember that a house doesn't have to look like a museum," Quinn said. "It can look lived in. I think that's important for people to accept. You just don't want too much disarray where it looks messy and people are embarrassed by it."

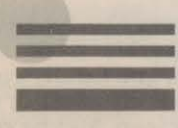
Sarah Drexler is another ant clutter success story. An attorney living in Northbrook with her husband and three children, Drexler says her home used to be unorganized. She'd struggle daily to find matching clothes for her children, while tripping over her children's toys.

Those days are long gone, though. In 1999, Drexler began working with a home organizer who put her residence back in order.

What's Drexler's secret? She puts everything in its proper place.

"Now when people suddenly drop in, it doesn't bother me at all," Drexler said. "My kitchen is in such good order. My kids' clothes are all where they're supposed to be. Whenever we need someone to come stay with the kids, or whenever we hire a babysitter, we know where the kids' pajamas are, where their silverware is, everything. We don't have to scramble around like we would before."

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## RENOVATE: Capturing the spirit of architecture

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Shannon Daily, a Realtor at Remax Team 2000 in Palos Heights. "Lots of people in the Chicago area want a big front porch or a large family room. Sometimes they want a specific style like a Tudor, a colonial, or one with gingerbread decoration."

Daily has sold just about every type and age house in the last 12 years, from those built in the late 1800s to contemporary executive homes designed to look like French country manors. But most people are hard pressed to put a precise name to specific architectural styles of their neighborhood homes, she said.

"If you read real estate ads, you think there are only three styles: colonial, ranch and Victorian," said Vince Michael, director of the Historic Preservation Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "There were a lot of different styles in the 19th Century that we tend to lump together as Victorian."

It is much more complex than that, Michael said, because houses and building materials have evolved since settlers began pouring into Illinois in the 1830s.

You can still find a handful of original log cabins at local historical society sites. And there are Greek- and Gothic Revival-style houses built from the 1840s on, especially in towns like Lockport, Lemont, Evanston and Geneva.

There are scores of highly decorative Italianate-style homes built in the 1860s, followed by Queen Anne, Folk Victorian, stick-style Victorian, Romanesque, foursquare, Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, bungalow, Craftsman, Prairie, ranch houses and numerous hybrids.

Architects designed some of these elaborate homes, but carpenters and builders often used house plan books, many of which are available today as reprints.

Downers Grove has so many Sears Roebuck mail-order homes (about 450 models were advertised in catalogs between

1908 and 1940) that the visitor's bureau created a self-guided tour booklet of the area. (See <http://visitor.vil.downersgrove.il.us>)

"Certain styles predominate in some areas," Daily said. "Chicago's famous for its all-American bungalow, which is loved by city dwellers, because bungalows are traditional, homey and offer a lot of space. You'll find a wide variety of ranch homes in the suburbs, and in some areas, Cape Cods and brick Georgians are very popular."

Some of these homes have been demolished to make way for new construction. In recent years, historical societies in Hinsdale, Elmhurst, Geneva, Orland Park and Lockport created booklets to explain local houses that are historically and architecturally significant.

"Hinsdale has torn down about one-fifth of its buildings in the past 15 years," Michael said. "Your house's value is the location, and it comes from the houses around it."

### Teardowns of homes

Michael said he laments the continuous teardowns of unique older homes to accommodate new massive mini-mansions that bump up incongruously next to Victorian-era dwellings.

The recent teardown phenomenon has slowly led to an increasing awareness of the local architecture and cultural history that is gradually being erased from many neighborhoods.

"I think people are more cognizant of house styles than they were before. There's been more restoration going on," Michael said. "Knowing the style of your house gives you a sense of its design. When you're making repairs or alterations you can make them work with the original design rather than against it."

Using materials that are sensitive to the architecture is important if you want a cohesive look when you are finished, he said. "If you are working on the windows on a Queen Anne house or Prairie house, you wouldn't use a window that had a lot of little divided [panes]," Michael said. "The lines of that style window wouldn't make sense with the lines of the house. You never would have seen that at the time the home was built."

Rehabbing is not for everyone, however, said architect Michael Lambert of Arris Architects in Morris. Lambert is restoring his 1858 Gothic Revival

house in Plainfield.

"Make sure you enjoy old-house living before you move into one," Lambert said.

You can still get the look and feel of a vintage-style house without the headache of having to fix it up. Many new houses are hybrids, a collection of by-gone styles.

"They are a mix of everything that is old and new," Daily said. Prairie and bungalow lines are appearing in dormers, doorways, windows and roof lines. Some subdivisions, such as Prairie Crossing in Grayslake, offer old-fashioned national-style farmhouses, American foursquares and Prairie-style houses that create a nostalgic feeling.

"The vast majority of home builders are using variations of Queen Anne a lot," Michael said. "They appeal to a large number of people."

The Queen Anne houses are a favorite of design historian Joan Hansen of Chicago.

"You see this style across the country, but there are many in the Chicago area," Hansen said. "There's an egalitarianism about that style, because they ran the gamut, from palatial homes to modest ones. It was not an architecture that was strictly associated with the well-to-do."

No matter what their size, Hansen calls Queen Anne houses charming and seductive.

"The architecture is very individual and spirited," Hansen said. "The style embodied the Aesthetic Movement, which sought to bring art into everyday life. There was more freedom to combine elements in an eclectic way in decorative arts and architecture."

Many Queen Anne-style houses have weathered the teardown syndrome because their roomy parlors and dining rooms and tall, airy ceilings make them adaptable for contemporary use.

"They often have wonderful nooks and crannies, but they also have served the needs of successive generations," Hansen said. "Multiple room use became more common during the period these houses were built. We can relate to that today, when we use a family room for several activities."

For would-be renovators, Hansen advises, "You want to understand the ethos of the house. It's important to know what the style was and when it was built so that you can capture the spirit and make changes that are sympathetic to the underlying history."