



THE TRANSFORMATION OF A 'SLOPPY JO'

What happened when a professional organizer took on the “glorious mess” of the writer’s possessions

BY STEPHANIE DAVIS

WHEN I WAS a wee Ms. Adventure, I had a nickname. My beloved Grandpa Jim coined it. My middle name is Jo, so he lovingly called me his little “Sloppy Jo.” ¶ I was cleanliness-challenged (no, that’s not an actual condition—I just made it up). I never made my bed, or picked up my clothes, or put the cap back on the toothpaste. My toys were scattered everywhere, my shoes were

strewn throughout my bedroom, and I never brushed my hair. I was famous for spilling my food on my shirt and accidentally knocking over my beverages. My fingernails were dirty from playing with crayons and clay, and I was far too busy reading books or performing in one-woman shows in front of the bathroom mirror to clean my room, fold my clothes or worry about stains. Even as a child, I was far more interested in living life than being neat and organized. I never minded that Grandpa called me Sloppy Jo—after all, a Sloppy Joe was a delicious sandwich.

As I grew up, my messiness only got more epic in scope. When I learned to drive and got my first car, it became a giant purse filled with empty Diet Coke cans, candy wrappers and garage sale finds that I was always forgetting to take inside the house. Laundry piled up as more clothes were purchased, and even though I had finally started brushing my hair, my barrettes and brushes and hair

ties littered the bathroom counter.

Throughout the years, many brave, kind, dear friends have tried to clean and organize my various spaces, but I typically thwarted their efforts by bringing out a bottle of wine to distract them. I'd much rather listen to music and gossip and drink than clean out a closet.

But, when I got married 12 years ago to a quite tidy and organized man, everything changed. My husband, Todd, accepted the Sloppy Jo in me, but only if my messiness was relegated to just one room. My nickname from Todd is "Bunny," and a spare bedroom at our condo is lovingly referred to as "The Bunny Hole"—and, oh, what a glorious mess of shoes, clothes, hair accessories, water bottles and dust The Bunny Hole was—that is, until Marla Ottenstein, Professional Organizer walked in to both my Bunny Hole and my life—and transformed both.

The Saturday that Marla came to our condo, complete with countless pairs of rubber gloves and tons of heavy-duty lawn bags along with her boundless energy and expertise of organization, is an adventure that I'll never forget.

Marla was super experienced, and, as she told me before she showed up promptly at 8 a.m., she's "seen it all"—but I was sure The Bunny Hole would daunt even the most adept of organizers. Yet when Marla, a tiny dynamo of a lady in leggings and a tank top, set eyes upon her task, she didn't blink. "We have a lot of work to do—but we've got this!" she said. And she deftly dove into The Bunny Hole with unmatched courage.

The thing is, life happens and things get out of hand. And yet Marla never once criticized or admonished as she tore through layers upon layers of clothing on the floor, the bed and the closet. We had huge bags for trash, huge bags for donation, and lots and lots of beautiful velvet hangers that Marla encouraged me to buy prior to her visit. All the plastic and wire hangers were donated. All the clothing that fell under Marla's "Too Rule" ("too tight, too loose, too young, too old") were donated.

Everyone has that one day a year when they go into their closet and try to figure out what to keep and toss. You find yourself

trying things on and hemming and hawing and taking up way too much time deciding whether to keep a white T-shirt that you've owned since 1993—but Marla was an elixir for me. I had 8 hours with her and I wasn't wasting time—sentimentality went out the window as I kept tossing and tossing and tossing things into the donate bags. In the end, there were eight 200-pound lawn bags filled with clothing to donate. Eight.

As we worked, Marla sprinkled in her words of wisdom:

"Want to buy something new? You'll have to ditch two things before you do."

"If you don't like how you look or feel in a particular outfit, get rid of it!"

"Purchase matching no-slip 'flocked' hangers and hang all clothing in the same direction; when you run out of hangers, you know it's time to clean out your closet."

There was much, much more—a professional organizer has a wealth of wisdom—but Marla also had compassion. We kept a little room in one drawer for "sentimental" clothes—an old concert T-shirt and a too-small University of Tennessee jersey I stole from my husband. Marla was also super discreet; there were things we discovered in The Bunny Hole that I hadn't seen since the early '90s.

These days, The Bunny Hole is in such organizational bliss that it's been renamed "Bunny Heaven." And while I love how clean and pretty the space looks and how organized the closet is, what I value most is how clear my head is. There's space now to think, and so much more time—time that was sucked up by rooting through clothes in the morning is now time that I can use for reading books, watching movies, listening to music.

I suppose, in retrospect, becoming organized is just like any big step in life: You have to be ready—and I was. But, don't get me wrong. I still accidentally spill things, and my car continues to be in disarray—a part of me will always be my grandpa's little Sloppy Jo—but these days, my closet is AMAZING. ✨

For more information on how to embark on an organizational adventure, call Marla Ottenstein at 597-6277 or visit professionalorganizerflorida.com.