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All Stored Up

People dissatisfied with their storage space and looking for places to put their belongings are getting help

By Andrea Jares

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People who have stuffed their homes and apartments full of belongings are now looking for more space to put it all in or better ways to organize it.

Consequently, a wave of self-storage facilities, professional organizers, garage-cabinet sellers and organization stores are popping up nationwide -- including in North Texas.

"Industries are born of need, and it's no accident that product retailers and the professional organizing industry as a whole is growing by leaps and bounds. There's more to organize than ever before," said Barry Izsak, a professional organizer and president of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

Though the median size of a house has increased 53 percent to 2,123 square feet in the last 30 years, two-thirds of people surveyed by the National Association of Home Builders said they were dissatisfied with the storage space in their homes.

"People are living in houses that are bigger but have less attic space and smaller back yards to store things," said Mark Brewer of Bedford, who this year started Garage Concepts, a garage organization business.

Consumers are bombarded with advertisements urging them to buy more things.

"We're bringing home all of this stuff, and we're not thinking about how we're going to use it or where we're going to put it, and it continues to add to the existing clutter," Izsak said.

In addition, trendy TV programs that show people how to keep their homes shipshape have popped up in the last few years. Home & Garden Television introduced the *Mission: Organization* program last year, and The Learning Channel now offers *Clean Sweep*.

All this is contributing to the growth in popularity of storage units and professionals who help people better organize their belongings.

"It is becoming a huge need right now for people because they have a lot of stuff," said Jennifer Humes, a personal organizer in Dallas and president of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

Self-storage units and home-organizing products and services have become multibillion-dollar industries. And Texas, where the storage unit was born, has become the state with the most storage facilities, according to MiniCo, a multifaceted company that serves the self-storage industry.

In an effort to meet consumer demand, the amount of square footage for rent in self-storage facilities nationwide has increased 32 percent between 2002 and 2003.

Statistics for Tarrant County were unavailable. But experts say the strongest growth has been in the northernmost and southernmost parts of the county, where a lot of housing development has occurred. The Keller area added about 500,000 square feet of storage space, and last year the Mansfield-South Arlington area added about 300,000 square feet, according to the latest numbers from the Richard D. Minker Co., a Fort Worth commercial real estate company that specializes in the self-storage industry.

Mike Long, vice president of Andalusia Builders of Arlington, has built almost 2 million square feet of storage space in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in the last year and a half. That's the fastest pace at which his company has ever built self-storage units.

North Texas has been building at a rapid pace in recent years, but steel prices and land costs seem to have put a damper on growth this year, he said.

Long said his company is busier than ever because businesses are using units for storage, companies are replacing outdated storage units and more demand is coming from people who want to store their belongings.

Storage units have traditionally been more abundant in the Southern and Western states, where basements are a rarity and people often move to retirement communities.

The National Association of Professional Organizers grew 30 percent in the last year to 2,600 members. And the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter alone, which was founded in April 2003, has doubled its membership to more than 40.

Services and products for home organization make up a billion-dollar industry, said Izsak, but no group tracks it specifically.

Even Coppell-based The Container Store tripled in size this spring when it moved into a 1.1 million-square-foot warehouse and distribution center.

San Rafael, Calif.-based California Closets, the largest closet-organizing company in the world, creates custom storage for spaces for between \$400 and \$30,000. The company doubled its sales between 1987 and 2002.

Storage units more popular

Storage units have evolved from their humble cinder-block beginnings in the 1960s. Now many of them are climate-controlled and offer specialty services such as wine-storage units, or they offer to pick up customers' belongings and pack it all in a unit.

The units have gained popularity among businesses stocking inventory, divorced people who are between homes and those who have lost their jobs and moved in with friends. They're also used to store items that people want to forget about but can't let go.

"I've been called out to them several times, and most of the time, people just don't want to touch it, because if they put it in off-site storage, then they don't have to deal with it," Humes said. One client accidentally packed garbage in boxes and unwittingly paid to store it for years.

A typical 10- by 10-foot storage unit in Tarrant County costs \$68 to \$80 per month, according to a Richard D. Minker Co. report.

The easy solution, a Dallas resident says, is for people to get rid of things they don't need.

Mark Ludwig, a software engineer, said he maintained a three-bedroom home, including lawn care and a hot tub, by himself.

Then he decided it was too much to deal with. So he got rid of more than half of his belongings, and six weeks later moved into a one-bedroom high-rise condominium in Highland Park -- and loved it.

"Once you get rid of all the stuff you don't need, it's freeing" said Ludwig, who read several books explaining how to live simply before changing his lifestyle.

Calling on organizers

People not as disciplined as Ludwig sometimes turn to professional organizers. They receive \$40 to \$200 an hour to put their clients' homes in order. The organizers help them make decisions on what to throw away, teach them how to use software that organizes finances and set up filing systems.

Other people turn to garage organizers.

"The garage is the perfect place to utilize and store those items in a nice, neat organized way, because it's really the only place they have to do it," said Brewer of Garage Concepts.

His company outfits garages with custom cabinetry and shelving in brushed aluminum, stained wood and other materials.

Brewer decked out his first garage with pine cabinets, a 36-inch television with surround sound and an inlaid marble-topped workbench.

Not only was his garage a head-turner with his neighbors, but soon they commissioned him for stylish -- if not, luxurious -- solutions for corralling stray tricycles and unseasonable Christmas decorations that encroached on their space.

The requests came in so steadily that Brewer quit his job in financial and accounting and began operating his business full time in January.

More people are expected to be called to help people organize.

"In my opinion," Izsak said, "the growth that we're beginning to see now is just the tip of the iceberg."

Downsizing

- Take five minutes once or twice a day and dedicate it to cleaning out an area. Set a timer.
- Throw out catalogs and magazines that are not current.

- Pick a number -- any number -- and throw away, donate or put away that many items each day.
- Don't hang on to things that you do not use. Trust that things will become available to you again if you need them.

SOURCE: Jennifer Humes, Dallas-based professional organizer

BY THE NUMBERS

37,011 Number of self-storage facilities in the United States in 2003, up from 35,176 in 2002

1,385 Median square footage of a home built in 1970

1.32 billion Number of rentable square feet of storage space on the ground in 2003, up from 995 million in 2002

2,123 Median square footage of a home built in 2003

SOURCES: National Association of Home Builders, MiniCo 2004 Self-Storage Almanac

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