



ellen faye organization

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Nonprofit agency director Norie Wisniewski, left, hopes to get organized with the help of Ellen Faye of Straighten-Up, Cherry Hill.

For an executive director, organization is a challenge

By Jane M. Von Bergen
Inquirer Staff Writer

Because she works with so many fragile people, Norie Wisniewski understands more than most people how abilities can slip with age or even with a single catastrophic illness.

That's why, she said, it is imperative that she get her office at Interfaith Caregivers in Haddonfield more organized.

"I know I'm getting older," said Wisniewski, 62, the executive director. "I'm looking at a legacy now. I know I'll have to hand this over to someone someday."

Even though client and volunteer records are in perfect order at the agency, which provides services to homebound senior citizens, Wisniewski's own notes and files are not.

On the surface, Wisniewski looks very organized. Her desk is nearly empty and there are no random stacks of paperwork on the floor. But appearances are deceiving.

Here's a typical scenario: Because Wisniewski belongs to many community organizations, she'll leave her office to attend a meeting. She'll walk out with a file for that organization, her notebook and a calendar - all good.

But when she's at the meeting, people will start handing her paperwork for other projects. She'll jam those papers in the file, even though they don't belong there. When she comes back to the office, there will be more meetings. By the end of the day, there will be many files, all in disarray.

And because she wants her desk clean, she'll throw them in a box stashed under a table.

"I'm protected by a higher power," Wisniewski told organizer Ellen Faye. "I've never lost anything yet, but I'm on the edge."

Even so, it takes Wisniewski longer than she'd like to find the information she needs.

Faye asked other questions and soon learned that Wisniewski's computer files were also disorganized. She offered to sort them for her. And she also offered to help dig her way out of the box under the desk.

"I know what I'm doing wrong, but I don't know how to fix it," Wisniewski said.

As an immediate solution, Faye suggested that Wisniewski carry a clear portfolio to each meeting. In it would contain a file for that meeting as well as extra pens, because Wisniewski complained that hers get borrowed but not returned.

"The extra pens are too brilliant," Wisniewski said.

More important, Wisniewski would stash the extra papers in the portfolio, but not in the file. When she got back to the office, it would be easy to see what didn't belong and should be filed later.

Wisniewski liked the plan. "I'm a Catholic-school girl. I'll do what you tell me to do."

Faye asked Wisniewski if she would schedule four hours for setting up the systems, asking her staff to protect her from all but the most urgent interruptions.

But carving out the time won't be easy. Wisniewski knows that many of the clients are frail. Twelve clients have died since the start of the year.

"I don't want to waste time on small things anymore. I'd rather go and have a cup of coffee with someone who needs me," Wisniewski said. If people need help, they are going to get it, right away. "If I screw this up," she said, "I'm dealing with other people's lives."

Executive director:

Norie Wisniewski, 62, Haddonfield

Background:

After graduating from college, Wisniewski taught first grade until she retired to raise her family. In 1993, after years of volunteering, Wisniewski became the paid executive director of Interfaith Caregivers, a social service agency. This is her first office job with a staff, budget and reports.

The Fixer:

Ellen Faye, 45, Straighten-Up, Cherry Hill, www.straighten-up.com.

One-on-one rate: \$60 to \$100 an hour

Background:

After graduating from college, Faye worked in hotel management for 14 years. She left when she had children. She realized that all the organizational abilities she needed in hotel management could be the basis of a business compatible with raising a family. She started her organizing business in 2001 when her youngest reached school age. She has about 30 residential and small-business clients a year.

The problem:

Even though the agency's client and volunteer files are impeccable, Wisniewski's meeting and project notes are in disarray. That same lack of organization is evident in her e-mail and computer files. Because she prefers a nearly empty desk, files that aren't handled by the end of the day end up out of sight in an unsorted box under a table. Notes from meetings get mixed up in the wrong files. Her biggest problem is setting priorities among myriad demands and figuring out how to address those priorities in the least stressful way.

The solution:

- Get in the habit of scheduling twice as much time for any task, instead of figuring it can be done in half the time necessary.
- Set aside four hours periodically to process paperwork. Ask the staff for protection from all but life-threatening interruptions.
- Make a more reliable to-do list with the page divided into four quarters - hot items on the upper left and then A, B, and C priorities. Revise as necessary.
- Set up folders for e-mail and for computer files. Sort out files and catch-all box.
- Get control of e-mail. Work on it for 10 minutes, then quit. If something can be handled in two minutes, do it. Otherwise defer it, but note that on the to-do list.
- Rearrange desk drawers so most important and immediate papers from current projects can easily be filed in the closest drawer, not in the catch-all box.
- Buy one portfolio for every regular organization attended, so it's easy to grab-and-go for the meeting and also easy to organize later.
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Will it work?

Faye: "It's satisfying when someone is so receptive and they make the connection and they understand where we are going."

Wisniewski: "I went in with 100 percent attitude that it was going to work. It has not only put a smile on my face, but a smile in my heart. Even if I never see Ellen again, what she has taught me will be with me forever."

Biggest obstacle:

Faye: "Her having the time to commit to the project. If she has a client that needs attention, this project gets put on the back burner."

Wisniewski: "I never felt there was an obstacle. I trusted her completely."

Blog Posting on Mon, Mar. 13, 2006

DIGGING OUT

How it Works

The Director Loves Her Clear Portfolios

In a few hours, I'm driving to New Jersey to visit Norie Wisniewski, who is the executive director of Interfaith Caregivers in Haddonfield, and her organizer, Ellen Faye, of Straighten-Up in Cherry Hill. Interfaith Caregivers teams volunteers with fragile elderly or homebound people to provide a helping hand -- with transportation, grocery shopping, companionship. Many clients are at the end of their lives and Wisniewski knows how precious their time can be.

I was with them when they first got together in January. Norie told Ellen that because she knows her clients' time is precious, she helps them first. That means that she falls behind on some of her own administrative tasks, such as keeping on top of e-mail or managing meeting notes. Plus, Norie never fully understood a computer system that had been set up for her.

Since then, they met once, on February 9. I wasn't there, but they both sent me reports.

Here's what Ellen wrote:

Norie and I met on Thursday, Feb. 9, from 1 to 3 p.m.

Our session began with general discussion about how things were going. Norie was excited about a few small changes she made and the big improvements that resulted.

We talked about:

·Having extra pens - and how that small change made her feel in control and carrying the plastic sleeve so that materials wouldn't get intermixed. We also talked about her calendar and her frustration with appointments. From our first meeting she was able to figure out that by using pencil in her calendar she could make changes much easier. She has begun to code tentative meetings with question marks and other possible dates, and then can just erase the other possible dates when the meeting goes definite.

·Her waiting time when donors/volunteers are late. Norie has always brought work to do - but is going to make a conscious effort to schedule her meetings in a way that better matches the personality of the person she is meeting with. If they tend to always be an hour late for breakfast, she is going to schedule lunch or afternoon meetings instead. We also talked about reframing the experience when people are late - that she just has to let it go and see what opportunities await her instead. So instead of sitting and stewing about wasting an hour, she should consider the time a gift to think about, plan or do something else.

I then presented Norie with the Needs Assessment Summary from our first meeting. She reviewed it and discussed how I handle it if the client wants to change the order. I explained that it was a fluid document that was meant as a guide and that it's purpose was to keep us focused on those tasks that were identified at our first meeting as most important as well as to direct us as needed. If the client wanted to change direction, that was their choice.

Norie commented that she wondered if it would be valuable for her to summarize certain meetings she has in the same fashion. We talked about how much time it took to write up the notes and how I felt that it couldn't be a boiler plate kind of paper - but that it had to be specific to each client, or in her case, meeting. I find the summary very helpful in solidifying the client's situation and needs in my mind so I can keep them focused.

The one thing that I told her I felt strongly about was finishing a task before moving to another - that an unfinished task is as good as wasting time, money and resources, because if the area is not well organized the client won't be as successful in maintaining the area.

With that we moved on to the first project, analyzing and adjusting the organization of files on Norie's personal computer to ensure easy access to frequently utilized files. We began by bringing a smaller chair behind her desk so we both could see her computer. I sat at the computer but Norie eventually ended up

sitting on the desk next to me so that we both could see the computer screen.

First I evaluated what was going on with her computer. It appeared as if her files were added to the agency's network, but not put on the server in any logical order. Some files were on the server, some were in "My Documents" and some appeared haphazardly on her system. (They had just recently undergone a computer upgrade in the office - but since her tech guy cancelled two appointments on her and she couldn't find the files she needed on her system we decided that she couldn't wait for him anymore and we just had to make it work.)

Since there was no reason for her files to be on the server I copied all the files back into My Documents. We then began setting up file folders just as we would do in a manual file system. Many times I got up and showed her visually in a physical file how the computer file system mimicked the typical file drawer, with folders, sub-folders and documents inside.

Many file folders had been set up on her system - but when I asked where a specific document should go Norie would give me a different folder name. We kept setting up new folders and put very few documents in the existing folders. We discussed how she wouldn't want to have too many folders to look in but that what would most likely happen, is that the old folders that were there that she didn't use we could delete so only the ones that she would think to use would have documents in them.

I suspect that someone else set up the initial folders for her. But if her thought processes wouldn't lead her to those folders then they were as good as worthless. If she wanted to find an old file on "Spring Event" and her mind thought "Fundraiser," then it would do no good at all to file the document into "Events" or "Special Events" folders. If Norie thinks "Fundraiser," then that is where it should go!

We progressed through about 75 percent of her documents. Norie felt the need to delete obsolete files which we did some of as we went along.

For homework, Norie is going to look into one or two folders a day and delete obsolete files. When I return, we will finish processing all the document and then look into the files further to see if and where sub-files will be beneficial.

Filing takes a balance between breaking things down enough to find them but not into so much detail that one is overwhelmed by the number of files there are. This is what we will work to bring into the best balance for Norie.

Norie and I clearly connected from the get-go. There is a mutual level of respect and admiration that is making this project productive and fun. I felt that the session went very well and much was accomplished. I think Norie felt relief in having easy access to the files she uses most frequently.

(Comment from Jane: Ellen has told me that she feels very good about working with Norie, because it is her contribution to the Haddonfield community. Norie is out working in the field and working hard, Ellen says. But if Ellen can make Norie more effective, Ellen has also served her community.)

Here's what Norie wrote:

I am so pleased that I was selected for this project.

Ellen has been so positive and practical to work with. Everyone always compliments me on how organized I am and Ellen realized immediately that I could move things up to another level. Ellen

understood that I wanted more time in my life, not that I necessarily felt unorganized. There are many things I would like to do and often I feel short on time. How liberating that Ellen took away my small plate and gave me a bigger one! Also, working with senior citizens and the disabled, I am faced daily with the fact that life is short. So to be given the gift of more time is just that, Ellen's gift to me.

Ellen's ideas are also so easy to implement. I was able not only to accept her suggestions (she is so non-threatening), but also to explain to her that sometimes the nonprofit world is a bit different from the corporate sector and volunteer staff and paid staff also can be worlds apart. She was able to understand immediately my perspective on things.

Ellen asked that I give her some stressors in my daily life. Committee meetings were a struggle as many times I am given items unrelated to that committee. In order not to lose papers or have things dog-eared, I put them in my committee folder. Thus, a golden opportunity to misplace items! Ellen introduced a plastic box system - a box that contains the committee folder, my daytimer, and three pens. Any random items I receive at the session go into the clear container - I automatically see them and have to deal with these items, when I return to the office! No way can they stay in the wrong folder or get lost!

The three pens idea is so practical. Ellen asked if I am ever asked to borrow a pen. It had just happened in the hour before at a meeting! It was as if she were a mind reader! Instead of focusing 100% on the comments being made, I wanted - maybe even needed - my favorite pen back. In the last several weeks I tote my favorite pen along with 2 disposable ones in my box!!!! I can lend pens out with a smile and never even imagine getting or not getting them back!

Ellen also suggested a simple change in entering dates in my daytimer. If a meeting doesn't have a definite date, but 4 that are questionable (I usually give my availability first for meetings and when the group selects a date they get back to me). Though always written in pencil with a ??? next to the meeting time, Ellen took my procedure to a different level. I now enter the ??? followed by a () with the alternative dates inside the (). When it is time to erase the dates not being used, I don't have to search for them - they are right there in the (). Brilliant or just simple, I am not sure, but definitely a time saving device for me!

My computer files were very annoying. Scattered here and there, Ellen gathered them together and gave me the responsibility of cleaning them out from the one location. Never for a second asked why I kept my history in front of me, nor suggested anything be deleted. Ellen simply asked if I trusted her. When I answered "Yes" I realized that I did just that and my life was on the way to that next level.

If our interaction ends today, if I have no more sessions, nor am given no more suggestions, I realize my desire to extend my day and to have more time, is a realistic goal. If an opportunity comes to join a new organization or have coffee with a friend, I can use my new gained time for these opportunities.

As both of my daughters are expecting my grandbabies within a day of each other, I know how I want to spend my gift of time.

Mon, Mar. 20, 2006

Clearing clutter bit by bit

By Jane M. Von Bergen
Inquirer Staff Writer



Details matter.

That's what neat-desked Norie Wisniewski has learned since she began "Digging Out" from her secret stashes of clutter.

Her nearly empty desk suggests an organized woman. Her folders, carefully carried to meetings, demonstrate the point. But behind the facade was a messy computer and a hidden crate full of unfiled documents.

Those were the big problems. But there were other annoyances. People habitually borrowed her pens, making it hard for her to take notes, which she sometimes put in the wrong folders anyway.

Organizer Ellen Faye had a simple solution for Wisniewski, the executive director of Haddonfield's Interfaith Caregivers social service agency:

Carry extra pens.

"That was brilliant," Wisniewski said, beaming. More important, that tiny detail led Wisniewski to trust Faye's instincts in clearing up her other problems.

Wisniewski had volunteered to confess her mess publicly to show how an organized workplace could free her to accomplish more in her community.

"I wanted a bigger plate," she said.

It was Faye's third visit last week and time to check on Wisniewski's progress.

At their first visit in January, Faye had suggested that Wisniewski carry a clear portfolio to meetings with a folder inside.

Material related to the organization would stay in the folder, and anything not related would be obvious and easy to organize. That worked perfectly for Wisniewski.

Faye also suggested that Wisniewski rearrange her office, and each weekend Wisniewski's husband came in to help her. A bookshelf was moved to a far side of the room and now holds binders from past events - important to keep but not to have nearby.

Wisniewski and Faye made big strides in a second visit last month.

A volunteer technician had set up Wisniewski's computer, but he had organized its files and folders his way, not hers.

Faye helped Wisniewski understand how computer files and folders should be parallel to paper ones.

"Suppose you drive a Honda," Faye said. "Should you file the maintenance records under *Honda*, under *Car*, under *Automobile* or under *Vehicle*? If you think *Car*, then that's where they should be."

In between visits, Wisniewski had been following Faye's advice to move computer files into the new folders, working in two 15-minute periods a day.

"I thought it was me," Wisniewski said about her messy computer. But it wasn't - her computer filing system had not been right for her.

"I am thrilled beyond thrilled by the fact that she is at peace with her computer," Faye said.

During the third visit, Faye pulled trash bags from her suitcase-size tool kit. Time to go through drawers and a catchall cabinet near Wisniewski's desk.

Out in the trash went some mementos.

Holding up a handmade gift, Faye asked Wisniewski: "Does this take more than it gives?" meaning does it provide a psychological lift, or does it cause a psychological drag?

That question helped Wisniewski decide.

Even so, she couldn't watch. She wanted some items gone, but couldn't toss them herself. So she turned her head as Faye quickly trashed them.

"I feel guilty about ditching stuff that someone made me," Wisniewski said.

Wisniewski's collection of funeral cards was spared as were agency brochures autographed by the volunteers and clients in the pictures. They went into a memorabilia drawer in a file cabinet across the room.

"If it makes you feel good," Faye said, "you should keep it."

Mon, Apr. 10, 2006

Clutter successfully corralled

By Jane M. Von Bergen
Inquirer Staff Writer

Executive director: Norie Wisniewski, Haddonfield

The Fixer: Ellen Faye, Straighten-Up, Cherry Hill, www.straighten-up.com.

The Problem: Even though Interfaith Caregiver's client and volunteer files were impeccable, Wisniewski's personal files were not, despite her organized appearance. Her problem turned out to be that kindhearted volunteers had set up her files, her computer and her office. But their organizational systems did not jibe with hers, creating inner chaos for Wisniewski.

The Solution: Faye showed Wisniewski a few tricks, such as carrying clear portfolios to meetings, so papers are visible. But her chief contribution was giving Wisniewski both the permission and technical assistance to design a computer and paper filing system that made sense to her.

Lesson learned: You can't change everything at once. You can do this in small manageable steps. You can take 15 minutes a day to go through old files, and it makes a difference.

Chance of it lasting:

Faye: 99 percent

Why: "She now has a sense of ownership over her space and time because she created her own organizational system."

Wisniewski: 100 percent

Why: "Because I have invested so much time into this project that it would be ludicrous not to take advantage of it."

Quote: "What I was after in my life was more time," Wisniewski said. "Now I'm able to stay in this job and do the things I want to do. Otherwise I don't know how much longer I could have stayed."

Posted on Sun, Nov. 26, 2006

Norie Wisniewski: More organized, more activities

By Jane M. Von Bergen
Inquirer Staff Writer

Norie Wisniewski, executive director of Interfaith Caregivers in Haddonfield, said she wanted to be more organized so she could take on a bigger plate of activities.

Do two grandchildren, born one day apart, to two different daughters in two states hundreds of miles apart, count?

They do to Wisniewski, who said her "Digging Out" sessions eight months ago with organizer Ellen Faye made it possible for her to take nine weeks off at the busy agency to help her daughters in August and September.

"We've never started a program year so far ahead," Wisniewski, 63, said in her neatly rearranged office. "We were in a real good spot when I left."

People who might see Wisniewski's tidy office or listen to her talk probably would not think she had struggled with disorganization. She kept it well-hidden - clean desk outside, disastrous drawers and mixed-up computer files inside. Whatever she couldn't handle, she threw into a box, which is now beyond empty: It's gone.

"I feel like I can be in control of all this stuff," Wisniewski said.

Organizer Faye of Straighten-Up, of Cherry Hill, had worried that Wisniewski would not have the time to put into setting up systems, but Wisniewski proved a willing pupil. "It always takes time to build the structure," Faye said. "But once the structure is set, it flies. Once we got going, she was fabulous. Norie is seeing the benefits."

Faye helped Wisniewski figure out her computer filing system so that files and folders were intuitive. She advocated an office redesign so files for current projects were in her closest desk drawer and reference files were in a file cabinet in the corner. Before, it had been the opposite.

Faye also proposed a plan to move furniture so that Wisniewski's office became open and hospitable.

Wisniewski kept mixing up papers related to the different meetings she attends. Faye figured out a solution, using clear plastic portfolios.

Early on, Faye gained Wisniewski's confidence by solving a simple yet vexing problem. People always borrowed Wisniewski's pens, but did not return them. Faye's advice? Carry extra pens.

Perhaps the best endorsement comes from Susan D'Angelillo, the agency's service coordinator. D'Angelillo is a key part in the day-to-day operations at Interfaith Caregivers, which matches elderly or homebound residents with volunteers who run errands or provide companionship.

D'Angelillo said it had become easier for staff to find what they needed in Wisniewski's office, which, in turn, had changed the mood at Interfaith's Caregivers headquarters. "There's more energy in the office," she said.

The Fixer: Ellen Faye, Straighten-Up Cherry Hill

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