

get it

STRAIGHT

Orange City native Elizabeth Hagen has made it her life helping others organize their lives

BY BEKAH PORTER
STAFF WRITER

Elizabeth Hagen used to have a messy room. It's true. Sure, she might travel the nation teaching the tricks to a decluttered life, but that doesn't mean the 53-year-old professional organizer always practiced what she preaches.

"No, no, no, no, no," she said. "I was not born organized at all."

Instead, the mastermind of methodology learned the skill that has become her career, and her education came tuition-free.

"You don't go to college for this. You have four kids in five years. That's what you do," she said. "Then it's do or die."

Her resume proves the effort did not, in fact, kill her, although it certainly required serious survivor skills.

In the past decade, the Sioux Falls, SD, resident has started her own organizing business, ElizabethHagen.com, delivered more than 250 seminars nationwide and written a how-to book, "Organize with Confidence."

Of course, she managed all that with the help of her filing system and her day planner.

"Organizing's not brain surgery or rocket science," Hagen said. "It's basic common sense."

No, really, she insists. Perhaps people confuse organization with perfection, and that makes it seem unobtainable. But Hagen's explanation seems much more basic.

"It's getting things done when they're due and finding things when you need them," she said.

Easy as pie, right? Nope. Just like the dessert, organization comes with a recipe all its own, she said. Fortunately, Hagen shares.

On Jan. 28, the daughter of John and Doris Vogel of Orange City returned to her N'West Iowa roots to help 209 women at First Reformed Church in Maurice find their own sense of confidence when confronting clutter.

"I help the ladies get rid of all the excuses and break it all into a real simple plan," Hagen said.



Closets that could be declared disaster areas, kitchen counters exploding with stuff, offices piled with papers — each can be managed, Hagen said.

She knows because she sought that same advice herself. When she started her family nearly 30 years ago, she wanted one thing: To be the best mother and wife possible. But that meant organizing play dates and getting supper on the table and remembering it was her turn to take cupcakes for treat time.

"I started looking for help," she said.

Hagen found relief in a book crammed with all sorts of advice on menu planning and laundry lists and calendars and anything in between. With highlighter in hand, she attacked the book, marking passages she found useful, and day by day, she implemented the suggestions into her own life.

"And I started feeling better about myself, hence I treated people better," she said. "Before, when I lived in a cluttered environment and felt stressed out, I didn't like myself very much."

Years later — after tweaking and perfecting her own organizing systems — she started looking for career options.

"Everything I read kept asking, 'What do you love to do?'" she said. "Well, I loved to organize, but who ever heard of making that a career?"

Perhaps the National Association for Professional Organizers?

"Oh yes, there are about 4,000 of us," Hagen said.

From there, the ball kept rolling — and she was ahead of it, instead of chasing behind it wondering where her notes or bills were. She asked friends if she could help them organize. She penciled them in. Then she held seminars. She digitally recorded the speeches and entered the data into her computer system. Then she found clients. She organized their information in her filing cabinet. Then she traveled nationally. She placed her plane tickets in their designated spot. Then she wrote a book.

Now the expert on the subject, Hagen can return to her childhood days of messy rooms and explain the clutter away.

"Being organized is about how your environment functions, not how it looks," she said.

And Hagen means it.

"Organization is about peace," she said. "If I can walk into my home and feel peaceful, knowing that things are running as they should, and I can put my feet up on the couch, that means the world to me. That's organization."



To do list:

INSIDE LINE:

■ Want a one-on-one organization consultation? Want to order a book on how to make your life run smoothly? Or simply want to know what it means to organize with confidence? Visit Elizabeth Hagen's Web site, www.ElizabethHagen.com, or contact her at (605) 357-8767.

HOME BASE:

Organize your home filing system by creating the following categories.

■ **To Do Now:** You cannot go to bed or leave the office until this folder is empty.

■ **Calendar Entry:** These are items that need to be entered into your calendar.

■ **Call:** Store phone messages in this folder until you return the call.

■ **Church:** If you are active in church, put in your prayer lists, church activities, etc.

■ **Coupons:** Stick in your pizza coupons, your restaurant takeout menus, etc.

■ **Data Entry:** These are items to be entered into the computer.

■ **Errands:** This is a file to hold shopping lists and items you need to get, so you can make only one trip.

■ **Family/Business Associates:** Have a file for each family member or for each work person you deal with on a regular basis. File items you want to discuss with them.

■ **Online:** This is for Web sites you want to visit or e-mails you need to read.

■ **Order:** Keep confirmation of the orders you've made until the item arrives, or start a list of items to order.

■ **Read:** This should contain the items you want to read later. Take this folder when you go on a trip or to the doctor.

■ **Receipts:** Keep receipts for clothing and other items you aren't sure you'll keep. Go through this monthly.

■ **School:** Have a folder for each school your children attend. Keep class lists, school schedules, etc., in this file.

■ **Take Home/Take to Office:** Keep information for your other office here.

■ **To File:** For papers to be filed later.

■ **To Pay:** Put bills in.

■ **Waiting on Response:** For items

CUT CLUTTER:

■ Develop a system for handling incoming paper in your life.

■ As soon as you touch a piece of paper, choose one of the following action options: Discard, recycle, delegate, take immediate action, place in a follow-up pile, put in a reference file.

■ Open mail over a trash can or shredder to immediately deal with junk mail.

■ Put all reading material in one place so that when it's full, you know it's time to empty the bin. Scan a magazine quickly, and tear out interesting articles and put only those articles in your reading material place.

■ Handle e-mails like you would incoming paper by making the same decisions: Discard, delegate, take action, follow-up or file.

■ Treat voice mail similarly with same rules. Create a piece of paper if your decision is to file or follow up or reference.

■ Ask co-workers to stop sending unneeded memos, newsletters, printouts, etc. This stops unwanted paper at its source.

■ Do not postpone what you consider unpleasant tasks. There is a term for this — procrastination. If a project overwhelms you, break it into pieces, and attack the first piece today.

■ Take care or get rid of anything that has been unfinished or overdue for a long time. They clutter both your physical space and mental life. Finish the project or call it what it is — trash.

■ If items are not needed, used or loved, they are clutter. Throw them out, or give them away.

■ Clean one room by attacking one drawer or area at a time. Taking on the whole project at once usually leads to feeling hopeless or overwhelmed.

■ Use sorting containers to clean an area. Get empty boxes or containers, and use them to sort out the mess. Have garbage bags around marked "Throw" and "Give."

■ Do not move from your chosen cleanup area until you have either finished or worked a budgeted amount of time. If needed, set a time for 30 minutes and work until it goes off.

■ Use a uniform size of storage boxes or bins.

■ Clearly label items in storage spaces. This helps locate items easily. List the unit's contents on a 3x5 card, and tape to the bin.

■ Only buy things you want or need. This helps control clutter.

■ Never hang onto items with the reasoning that "someday, maybe" you will use it.

■ Get started by making a checklist of the places you want to organize, and then work on organizing them.

CLOSET CLEANUP:

■ Take everything — yes, everything! — out of your closet. If you go in and just move things around, that is called cleaning, not organizing.

■ Nobody likes to hear this, but try everything on. It is the only way to know what you want to keep.

■ Ask the following questions when trying on clothes: When did I wear this last? Does it still fit? Is it still stylish? Does it need repaired or altered? Does it look good on me? Do I love how I feel when I wear this?

■ Consider your answers to these questions, and then divide the clothes into the keep pile or put in bags to keep, throw away, repair or take to a garage sale or charity.

■ Purchase white hangers, and then put items back into the closet in the following categories: Shirts, blouses, pants, skirts, jackets. Arrange these categories from sleeveless to long sleeved. Then, short skirts to long skirts. Then by color, from light to dark.

■ Remove the bags the same day, and take to appropriate places.



CONFERENCE:

More than 200 women from N'West Iowa attended a conference on Jan. 28 at First Reformed Church in Maurice to hear professional speaker and organizer Elizabeth Hagen of Sioux Falls, SD. (Photos by Pat Bonz)



AT A GLANCE:

Name: Elizabeth Hagen
Position: Professional organizer and public speaker
Age: 53
Residence: Sioux Falls, SD
Education: Graduated from MOC-Floyd Valley High School in Orange City in 1972; earned a degree in family and consumer science from Westmar College in LeMars in 1977.

Experience: Started her own organization business, ElizabethHagen.com, in 2000; wrote an organizational guide book in 2006; was a stay-at-home mother to five children.
Family: Husband, Dr. Bruce Jon Hagen, and five children, Chris, 27; Emily, 25; Abby, 24; Sean, 22; Micah, 15.