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Avoiding Common Pitfalls When Cleaning Out after a Loved One Dies

Theresa Cashman / TLC Clearing Space

My grandmother, Florence, LOVED sewing. Growing up in the depression, she learned not only how to stretch a dollar, she learned how to stretch *pennies*. She used to tell us a story about a time when she was 9. All 8 of her brothers and sisters all gave up their Christmas presents so she could get a pair of glasses. When she was dating in the 40s, she made her own dresses (gowns, by today's standards). The last remaining dress lives in my closet. A beautiful, layered dress with tulle and eyelet overlays. This was clearly a woman who loved beauty and valued economy.

When she died, we were left to clean out a 3-story house she had lived in with my grandfather for over 50 years. The whole upper floor of this gabled house was filled with sewing machines and scraps of cloth from various projects. I'm sad to say that the combination of our grief over her passing and the pressure to get the house on the market meant we didn't have the time or energy to get her fabric (or many of the other items in their home) to folks who could use it. A lot of useful things, carefully organized and tended over decades, went straight into a dumpster.

Paired with the emotional toll on the family members, the physical strain can be more than most are willing or able to handle. If you've ever moved house yourself, you can appreciate the physical toll of boxing up and relocating everything in a home. And much like moving to a new house, when done well, a home clean-out is likely to take longer than you anticipate.

It can be very cathartic for a family to clear out the home of a loved one, to share memories and process grief together. But long-buried expectations about how grief is expressed, or arguments over who gets what, if not discussed ahead of the loved one's passing or outlined in the will, can turn nasty quickly and halt progress in its tracks.

In death (as in life) sometimes the loved one's family isn't the best option to get this work done. Calling on the help of a professional can allow the family to take the time to grieve and cut down on familial tension, stress and overwhelm.

During the process of a home clean-out, a professional organizer will typically first speak with the family and/or the family's attorney. From these conversations, they will learn about what items to look out for as they sort, and how the home should be prepared (i.e. for an estate sale, sorted for the family to go through, or cleaned out entirely.) The family has total control over what happens to the items in the home, as well as what is considered "trash," what should be donated, and to where, and what items are to be kept.

Calling on a professional can allow the family to take the time to grieve.

If you or someone you know is struggling with the overwhelming prospect of clearing out a home after the death of a loved one, we're here to help. ■

About the Author:

Theresa Cashman is the owner of Clearing Space, a professional organizing service focused on helping individuals, couples and families when downsizing, clearing clutter or preparing their spaces for whatever comes next. Passionate about personalizing the process and making it as simple and straightforward as possible, Theresa's experience and personalized approach helps to eliminate not only "stuff" but also the stress and anxiety that can come from Clearing Space.

When not helping you get organized, Theresa can be found creating beautiful stained glass, swing dancing, or leading a group of enthusiastic Brownie girl scouts.

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