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Taming Stashzilla

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Eleven years have passed since I joined ANG and the Gateway Chapter. It took me a couple of years to come up to speed, taking classes and attending seminar, but by the fourth year, I found myself with a growing collection of unfinished projects. Approximately six years ago, I started going through my stash annually, primarily to inventory UFOs. A couple of projects would be donated to an auction, but for the most part, the collection continued to grow unabated. My duties as ANG Director for Educational Services meant that the 2003 and 2004 inventories didn’t get done, and during that time, purchases, chapter projects, and workshop projects were pitched into a walk-in closet. The shelves were in disarray!

My growing sense of disorder – plus an inability to focus on a particular project or two – led me to a serious examination of my stash over Thanksgiving week. One of my concerns was that I’d reached SABLE - Stash Accumulation Beyond Life Expectancy. It was time to look seriously at each of my accumulated projects with a realistic eye: would I ever finish it? Did I even like the project? Was it going to be enough of a learning experience that it would hold my interest?

Step one.

I decided to keep only 7 years worth of projects. This was completely arbitrary. I’m 52 now; as ridiculous as 7 years of projects sounds, I didn’t want enough on hand to take me into my sixties.

Step two.

I pulled out all of the piles and boxes that constituted my stash and set them in the adjoining study so all projects were accessible and visible. My definition of “project”: painted canvases with or without threads; chapter or workshop projects with instructions, canvas, and threads; and published patterns with canvas and threads. It did not include pattern booklets for which supplies hadn’t been purchased. These went into my files for future reference.

Step three.

I evaluated each project against the following criteria:

- Do I still like the project? (you’d be surprised how your taste can change in 10 years!)
- Are there things I could learn from it that would justify keeping it?
- Am I likely to work the project?
- Is it more valuable to me – in some form, even unfinished - than it would be to someone else?

Step four.

After evaluating each project, I put it into one of five piles:

- Pile 1: Projects to give to my cross-stitching aunt. I’ll never work them, plus she’s on a limited income and appreciates receiving them.

- Pile 2: Donations to the Gateway Chapter annual Silent Auction. These are projects that failed all of my criteria for retention, but other chapter members would find them interesting enough to purchase.
- Pile 3: Projects to sell on EBay. These projects aren't likely to bring even close to their value at auction, but would be valuable to just the right person and could yield some income for me.
- Pile 4: Donations to the ANG National Auction. These, too, are projects that failed my criteria, *but* would bring a much better price at the ANG Seminar auction than at our chapter auction. These included projects by "hot" teachers.
- Pile 5: Keep and archive in binder as a reference for the techniques in the piece.
- Pile 6: Keep with intent to work further on it (note that this doesn't say "intent to finish"!!!)

Step five.

I calculated the number of projects I could retain under my seven-year rule.

- Look at projects in Pile 6, and estimate the average number of hours needed to finish each. I concluded that on average, each piece would require 40 hrs, since several of the projects were near completion, while others were barely started.
- Estimate the average number of hours I stitch per week. My estimate was 10 hrs.
- Use the following formula to calculate the number of projects to keep:
 1. 7 years x 52 weeks/year x 10 hrs/week = 3640 total stitching hours in the next 7 years.
 2. 3640 hours/40 hrs per project = 91 projects.

So how did I do after all of the sorting? I had 85 projects in Pile 6, well below my limit of 91.

Step six.

Organize the projects to be retained (Pile 6).

- Sort all of the projects by intended method of finishing. My categories included picture/pillow, boxtop, ornament, jewelry, stand-ups, purses, etc.
- I purchased storage boxes and legal size hanging files from Office Max. Each box was marked on the side to indicate what category it contained. The hanging files fit into the box lengthwise.
- If a project was on stretcher bars, I left it on them. The project was put into a plastic bag and placed in the storage box vertically, with a hanging file adjacent to it. The instruction booklet and supplies were put into the hanging file next to the canvas, and the file was labeled with the name of the project.

Step seven.

Dealing with the other piles.

- Pile 1: went directly into a Priority Mail box and after applying a postage-paid label printed from the USPS web site, it went out the door with the mailman.
- Pile 2: Items for the Gateway auction were bagged and are awaiting delivery to the event chairwoman. You'll have to come to the auction to see what's in the bag!
- Pile 3: A Lone Star Santa canvas made especially for Needleworks in Austin, TX sold in 5 days for my Buy It Now price.
- Pile 4: This included one of Tony Minieri's perfume bottles, including canvas mounted on stretcher bars, instructions, and all threads. It along with two painted canvases went into a Priority Mail box that was sent to the ANG Auction Chairman.
- Pile 5: Roughly a half-dozen projects were taken off the stretcher bars, and the canvases plus instructions were placed in a three-ring binder. In some cases, the margins of the canvas were trimmed so it would fit.

Where do things stand after all of these machinations?

- I have an Excel spreadsheet of 85 projects, and when new projects are accessioned into my collection, I can add them *and* put them in the right place for storage. This should eliminate the self-generating messy stack problem.
- I've learned a lot about myself and behaviors that lead to stash expansion. I'm definitely process-driven and not goal-driven. In other words, owning finished pieces doesn't motivate me. Instead, projects need to be something I enjoy stitching or from which I'll learn something new. Sometimes even a stitching deadline isn't sufficient to get me moving on a piece! This bit of self-knowledge will be a useful filter I can apply every time I think about purchasing a new project or class.

Happy New Year, fellow stitchers, and I hope the next 12 months bring you all that you seek in your needlework adventures (and that you identify what it is you seek!).

About the author: Denise has served on the Board of the St. Louis Gateway Chapter ANG as Newsletter Editor, Program Director, and President. In 2002, she chaired the ANG Workshop By Mail program, and in 2003-2004 served as the ANG Director for Educational Services. She is a contributor to the 2002 ANG Chapter Handbook, and the 2003 and 2005 ANG Chapter Project Books. She welcomes your comments and questions at denise@beusen.net.