

## Get It Straight

**Donna McMillan helps clients win the constant conflict with clutter. Her job is to organize – not unions, but mail, moves and more.**

By AMANDA BRONSTAD  
Staff Reporter

When Gina Markchisio started up her hotel reservations service, she figured she could manage the eight-person firm one problem at a time. Instead, she found herself mixing personal documents with business files, throwing unattended papers into random piles and being late returning calls.



“I was in a constant mode of firefighting,” said Markchisio, of Preferred Convention Services. “I’d go a month without opening mail. Parking tickets got tripled before I paid them. I needed professional help.”

Enter Donna McMillan, a woman who has built a business out of organizing people’s lives – from desks and files to closets and even magazine subscriptions. McMillan, owner and sole employee of McMillan & Co. Professional Organizing, handles about five clients a week – one of thousands of professional organizers nationwide.

“She would stop me and say, ‘What were you thinking just now?’ or ‘Why would you put it over here?’” remembered Markchisio, who hired McMillan to organize her desk. “She would get in my thought process. I would group things all by the category of what they are – shows, financials, personnel, development – but they were general categories. It wasn’t always obvious.”

### Self starter

A native of a small Kansas farm town, McMillan made her way west 30 years ago. Newly divorced and offered the opportunity to transfer to Los Angeles by her employer, an insurance agency, she opted for the fresh start.

She’d had stints back home managing offices for a mobile home seller, a truck body factory, a retailer and a claims adjuster. In L.A., she worked for the insurance operation before taking a job as a receptionist for a parking lot management company. On the side, McMillan became a Mary Kay consultant. “I learned a great deal about being a business owner, about marketing, how to treat customers,” she said of her Mary Kay experience.

After losing the job at the parking lot firm in 1984, she plunged headlong into her new business. At first, she billed herself as a secretarial service, Typing Etc. She had business cards printed and landed her first client, a home-based flower delivery service owner, after leaving a dozen cards at the print shop.

That first client needed her to answer phones and type invoices, but after she saw McMillan’s filing system, she asked, “I have a four-drawer cabinet loaded with (descriptions of) floral arrangements. Can you fix it?”

With that, McMillan honed her organizational skills. She charged up to \$25 an hour, more than the rate she had made in the corporate world, and joined several networking events, telling people she “typed and organized people.”

## **Staying booked**

McMillan would not give her current hourly rate because it changes frequently based on a number of things – including economic factors and the size and scope of the job – and she didn't want to be held to a specific figure.

Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers, said organizers charge anywhere from \$40 to \$200 an hour, depending on experience and the complexity of the job. McMillan's business comes through referrals from divorce attorneys, moving companies, real estate agents, computer consultants, wedding and event planners, retirement homes, Feng Shui consultants and, more recently, closet retailers.

McMillan says some of her clients are creative people who “tend to lean more towards what they love to do, whether writing or painting or whatever, versus addressing the very linear thinking of organizing.”

Once, a client hired her to organize the move of the contents of a two-story house. This job included changing his subscription addresses and phone service. “It's stressful,” she said. “It's overwhelming. It makes everyone feel like running away. Most change-of-life experiences are that way. You can't deal with the details.”

Eva Caulfield, president of A-1 Closet Design in Santa Monica, said she first met McMillan three years ago through a mutual friend. Caulfield, who designs and installs customized closets, said she often refers clients with the biggest closets to organize. “When you have a big closet, and then I whip everything out because I have to install it, and leave them with a beautiful structural thing with all these spaces, you're looking at all those clothes on the bed and saying, ‘What do I do with all this?’” Caulfield said. “Now the problem can be eliminated by calling Donna.”

At first, McMillan would see clients weekly or twice a month, so she could bill enough work to live on and gain experience. Now, she books a minimum five-hour session with a required four-hour follow-up.

McMillan said she tries to teach her clients how to avoid hiring her again by asking them about their existing organizational methods. Still, 30 percent of her clients hire her again, either for another project or because they have been unable to keep things organized on their own. “I call those tune-up appointments,” she said. “It happens all the time, and it's very common.”

## **PROFILE: McMillan & Co. Professional Organizing**

Year Founded: 1984

Core Business: Help people organize their homes and businesses

Goal: Expand clientele and build staff “so I can help more people enjoy the benefits of being organized”

Driving Force: Making personal contacts through networking, enjoying the high of watching people get control of their lives