

First Person

A quest for space takes her where few have gone before—Chicagoland's closets

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In an era of psychobabble, the term "closet designer" conjures up a clutter of images. To Iris Robinson Feeley, however, the meaning is clear. For the last 10 years this closet designer has brought order out of chaos for clients all over the Chicago area in her job with *The Closet People*. "Whether people live in modest or expensive homes," the 53-year-old says, "their possessions are important to them. Where to put things is an issue for everyone."

One of the Addison firm's five designers, Feeley makes between 10 and 30 calls a week on people who have requested estimates. She custom-designs the storage system during her visit to the client's home. Once the client accepts Feeley's design, carpenters construct the modular units from her blueprints, and installers put the system in place. "I love getting repeat calls because otherwise I never see my handiwork in its finished state," she told writer Marya Smith.

A native of West Chicago and Queen of the West Chicago Centennial in 1949, Feeley graduated from West Chicago Community High School in 1951. She then attended Northern Iowa University for two years, where she began a physical-education major then switched to textiles and design. Her work experience includes three and a half years as a flight attendant for American Airlines and two years in Carson Pine Scott & Co.'s personnel department. She and her husband, Frank, president of the May drugstores, have lived in the Miller Beach section of Gary, Ind., for 20 years. They have two children, Robin and Devitt, and a household of organized closets that Feeley designed herself.

I can see people's personalities in their closets. When I see a man who has all his hangers lined up exactly one inch apart, it's not hard to guess that here's a guy who's straight and narrow. But I'm looking at closets as a professional, not to be nosy. I'm like a doctor who looks at patients every day of the week and could care less about your body. I don't make judgments, and I don't tell the neighbors.

Seeing so many closets has made me realize a lot of people need help to get it all together. Basically, I see two main categories of people. First there are the organized people who are seeking to get more organized. They simply want a place for everything. They say things like, "Oh, how wonderful it would be to get my shoes off the closet floor." As it is, their shoes are already lined up.

The second group of people can't get organized at all. While an organized person can figure out where to put things, the other kind of person just doesn't have that kind



Toronto photo by Chantel Doherty

Closet designer Iris Robinson Feeley and an example of efficient utilization of space.

of control. A spatial concept isn't something everyone has. For that reason I always sit down with people even before I look at their closets so I can show them pictures before we begin. I remember one couple in particular who had a very difficult time understanding my plan for their closets. They were both doctors, but didn't seem to be able to think visually. I had to walk them through the design plan more than once. I felt very drained when I left, the way I suppose a teacher feels when she's trying to get across a difficult concept.

Many people ask me on the phone if they should clean their closets first. I always tell them not to. One woman told me when I arrived, "You can't get in my closet." I assumed she was exaggerating, but she said, "I mean, you literally can't get in my closet." It turned out that she had been through a very difficult time emotionally, deaths in the family, as I recall, and had just kept throwing things in the closet. When we opened the door, it was piled floor to ceiling and wall to wall with clothes—and it was a walk-in closet. She was very good-natured about the mess and took the end of my tape measure herself and climbed on her hands and knees over the piles. She even took "before" and "after" pictures.

Some people are embarrassed about showing a stranger their closets. They'll open the door and close it again as fast as they can, or say, "Do you have to look in the closet?" I do have to get into the closet to measure it and put the dimensions on graph paper. Then I need to make a visual inventory of what they have there. When

that's done, I can start designing. I do all my thinking on my feet. I don't go home to a drawing board. I feel like I'm doing 16 things at once—measuring, talking, designing—but I don't need peace and quiet to work. Once I see a person's possessions, things start to click. The design almost jumps out at you then. A good storage design is the right combination of long-hang space, double-hang space and shelving space. I involve the client, make suggestions, get reactions. Then I draw a bird's-eye-view blueprint on the spot and make sure they understand what I've done.

With couples, I always ask the question, "Can you two integrate yourselves in this closet?" People know themselves. Some say, "Oh, sure, we even use the same toothbrush if we have to." Others say, "Absolutely not." It can cost twice as much to divide a closet into two separate areas, but there are those who will share and those who won't.

Men basically have their own space to deal with. The major question is, "Do you hang your pants long or folded?" It usually depends on how their mothers started them. Some couldn't change even if hanging pants folded meant saving money or space.

Women traditionally have to deal with storage throughout the entire home, and function is very important to them. For instance, if they can triple-hang in a child's closet, they can actually see hand-me-downs before the children have grown out of them. I also design with my eye down the road. A 2-year-old, for instance, needs shelf space, but when she's 16, she'll want to convert that to hanging space, so my design allows

for that.

Every appointment varies, but I can estimate my time by how many closets I'll be doing. I'm often asked to do just one, but most of my calls are for the entire house and can take several hours. Costs can vary from \$300 for an entry closet to \$3,000 for a huge walk-in. The average five-foot closet costs \$300 to \$400 for design, construction and installation. Some people expect a \$79.95 special, but most know from their original call that it's not that kind of service.

I've been in and out of a lot of closets. I've designed closets as big as most people's bedrooms. When I first started, having all that space to work with almost threw me. More than one client in a city apartment or condo has had a separate efficiency apartment, not necessarily in the same building, that they wanted me to design for storage. In older homes a couple will often use what used to be the maid's quarters for the storage area. This is a wonderful utilization of space because most older homes, especially from the Victorian era, are notoriously low on closet space. In those times people used trunks and wardrobes and lots and lots of hooks. These older Georgian and Victorian homes are kind of what keep me going, because each one is different and challenging. If I only did modern, five-foot closets, I'd be bored. We all need variety.

I especially like the city and city people. My main territory is the North Side of Chicago, although I do make calls to all the suburbs and have gone as far as South Bend. I've learned Chicago so well now I feel like I grew up here. Because of this job I've been in neighborhoods I never would have found. I've developed an interest in architectural history from all this, and I've seen wonderful renovations all over the city. If we moved back, I would choose the Lincoln Park area because it has such a neighborhood feeling. I also love Hyde Park; people there are the most friendly.

It's satisfying to see the numbers piling up in my sales, because that means I'm doing a good job. But more than that, I love making a strange closet work. I've come up with enough unusual solutions that the carpenters say, "Oh, it's crazy, it must be Iris." To me, this work is a great creative outlet. I can't make a three-foot closet into a 12-foot one, but I believe there isn't a closet I can't make better.

Also, I'm a people person. One summer I worked in a small office, all by myself, and I hated it. I don't like desk work. On this job I have to do paperwork, sometimes one full day a week, and I also spend time on the phone trying to reach busy people. But making the calls to the homes is what I love. Of course there are occasional frustrations. When people don't show up for our appointment and then don't even call to apologize, there's steam coming out of my head. But in general I find people treat you as you treat them. With me, it's important to work with people.

When I was younger, I guess I had an idea of setting the world on fire, maybe doing social work, something to help people. Well, I'm not setting the world on fire, but I feel that what I do helps people, at least in a small way. ■