

What parents leave behind

In her new book, Charlotte's Estate Lady guides grieving families in dealing with a lifetime of belongings.

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Julie Hall, founder of the Charlotte business known as The Estate Lady, cleans out a home for a client to put the items up for auction. Hall has written a new book, "The Boomer Burden: Dealing With Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff," which comes out this week.



"Estate liquidation" sounds like a staid profession. In fact, it's more like being a detective, social worker and referee.

No one knows this better than Julie Hall, who has spent years breaking up sibling fights, uncovering dusty treasures and comforting clients distraught over parents' deaths and overwhelmed by everything left behind.

Now, the founder of the Charlotte business known as The Estate Lady is an author. "The Boomer Burden: Dealing with Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff" (Thomas Nelson, \$14.99), will be available in stores Tuesday.

The book, written both for baby boomers and their parents, includes advice, wisdom and horror stories – lessons about what happens when people refuse to plan for their demise.

With about 4,800 parents of baby boomers dying each day, Hall's publishers see a huge potential audience.

"From the minute (Hall's literary) agent pitched this project to me, I felt a connection to it," says Debbie Wickwire, the company's acquisitions editor. "I believed it could impact thousands of people,"

And that is Julie Hall's dream – to be a trusted, national expert. A resource for thousands. The Ann Landers of estates.

The things she finds

Hall has earned her expertise the hard way: Climbing through attics, peeking under beds and sifting through the possessions that help define a person's life.

That's what she was doing in a three-bedroom home in south Charlotte recently, after the death of its 84-year-old owner.

Hall started by noting which furniture pieces to sell and which to donate. She poured bottles of alcohol down the sink. Then, she began cleaning out the master bedroom. The home's owner had been Catholic. At the executor's request, Hall carefully put aside rosaries and other sacred items.

She worked quickly, emptying Q-Tips and paper clips into a trash bag, moving pens to a donations pile. "Sometimes, you find body parts," she said, holding up a partial denture.

She turned to a bureau, opening a drawer to reveal underwear, neatly folded. "It took me years to get over feeling like I was being snoopy."

In her book, Hall outlines her system for emptying a house and promises readers it'll allow them to finish in 10 days or less.

To begin, she recommends hiring an appraiser to avoid mistakenly tossing valuables.

Hall herself has made many surprising finds, including a turn-of-the-century Louis Vuitton trunk a client had chucked into a Dumpster. Lucky for the client, Hall threw herself over the side of the Dumpster and retrieved it. The trunk sold for \$4,100.

Once you decide what to sell, sort other items into trash, donations and recycling. Most books, especially paperbacks, are donated. Magazines are recycled. Are you saving Life or National Geographic magazines? Don't, Hall says. They're not valuable.

But Depression-era Americans do save a lot of stuff. Bread bag twist ties and Cool Whip containers are favorites, Hall has found.

They also often stash cash or valuables at home. She includes a list of the most common hiding places, including inside drapery hems, books, toilet tanks, flour and sugar canisters and ice trays.

Hall and her assistant had started work in the south Charlotte house on a Monday morning. By Thursday afternoon, it was empty.

She did find a mouse nest in a closet, but by Estate Lady standards, that's hardly worth mentioning. Over the years, she's discovered dead pets under beds, rare vases in a basement, a live snake in a kitchen cabinet and, once, 20 bags of narcotics. She gave those to police.

Leave no mess

There's nothing imposing about Julie Hall. She stands not quite 5-foot-4. She is polite and kind, with a girl-next-door smile.

But that sweet demeanor masks a woman who's seen some of the worst of human nature – family members who steal from the estate, a grandson who hides the will in a ploy to get grandma's stuff, scheming women who pilfer jewelry from their friend on her deathbed.

“Sometimes,” she writes, “there just aren't enough words to describe the horror I see.”

Hall, 45, got into her current line of work partly out of anger. As an antiques dealer and appraiser in Texas, she saw dealers, neighbors and even family taking advantage of elderly clients, stealing or offering pennies for collectibles worth hundreds. She decided elderly people needed an advocate. The Estate Lady was born.

In her book, Hall counsels that good planning can avert many problems. Don't worry about hurt feelings when selecting an executor. Name someone competent and efficient.

Share your plans with your children. And avoid future fights by putting in writing your wishes about who gets what. Finally, get rid of stuff now. Don't leave a mess for your kids.

Adult children can minimize friction, too, by holding a siblings meeting after a parent's death to discuss plans. Spouses of siblings should stay out of it. In-laws, Hall has found, are the ones who often start property fights.

Too much stuff

Years ago, Hall collected miniature portraits and carvings and discovered she had a good eye. That led her to appraising and selling, and eventually to liquidating.

But along the way, she lost her taste for collecting.

This may be an occupational hazard. You get so overwhelmed with stuff that you certainly don't want to bring more of it into your own home. She and her assistant joke that they could charge pack rats to work alongside them and call it aversion therapy.

And in her polite Estate Lady way, Hall laments our culture's materialism: "I don't want to sound judgmental," she writes, "because I'm including myself here, but after spending close to twenty years crawling over piles of stuff from wonderful, decent, mostly middle-class Americans, I think we may be trying to substitute possessions for the real thing."

With "The Boomer Burden" in stores this week, Hall's already-full career seems about to take off.

She's under contract for a second book. She's planning Web seminars to teach others to be estate liquidators. Corporations are soliciting her help as an employee resource.

For Hall, this is a calling – giving people information, easing their pain.

On a plane trip recently, she found herself beside a distraught man who confided that he'd recently moved his mother to a nursing home.

He held power of attorney and was executor of her estate. He and his siblings were already fighting over her estate. And he didn't know what to do.

Nobody's written a book about this, he lamented.

Actually, Hall replied, someone has.

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