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"I GREW UP IN THIS MESS"

There are more than 2 million hoarders in the U.S.—people who refuse to throw anything away. For their children, like Elizabeth Nelson, it can be devastating BY TAMARA JONES

THE GARBAGE ALL but spills out the front door when Elizabeth Nelson tries to step inside the suburban Midwestern home. She kicks a narrow path through stacks of yellowing newspapers and towering heaps of shopping bags crammed with thrift-store junk. Every possible surface is buried beneath debris, which crests like a wave in the family room. Within minutes, Nelson, a fit 33-year-old brunette with dark-brown eyes, is wheezing.

"Oh my gosh, the stench. It smells terrible in here," she mutters in disgust. "This is horrifying." From the outside, the place is an ordinary five-bedroom,

red-brick family home; inside, it looks like a squatters' camp. Bathrooms are black with mildew. The refrigerator is a gigantic petri dish. Cobwebs form gauzy valances in doorways. A bag of wild birdseed spilled in the family room ages ago, and cats have mistaken it for a free-range litter box. Nelson weaves through the overwhelming clutter: old prom dresses competing for space with warped Tupperware; broken furniture hidden beneath bags of unopened mail. Nothing, it appears, was ever thrown away—not even the dryer lint forming a gray mass the size of a soccer ball in

the laundry room. Peering through another door, Nelson freezes.

"Here is my old room."

It is the spring of 2006, and Nelson is staging a major cleaning intervention, capturing this decaying hovel on video for disbelieving relatives to witness. Her parents, currently on vacation, live here in secret squalor while carrying on normal lives in the outside world—her father is a lawyer, and her mother is a meticulously groomed church volunteer. Though the contradiction between her parents' public and private existences is now evident to Nelson, it

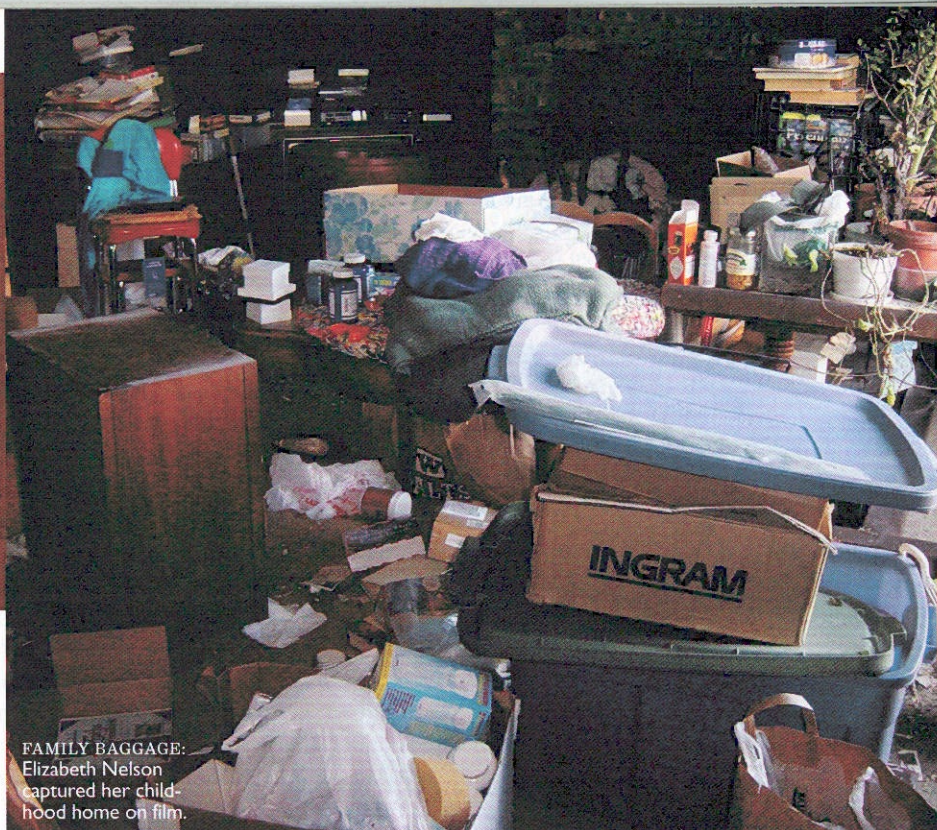


wasn't always. She spent her childhood hearing how her mother had attended graduate school at Yale and that intellectuals had better things to do than housework. "When I was 9 or 10, I got disgusted with my room and decided to clean it up," Nelson recalls. Outraged by the purge, her mother immediately started picking through the bags of trash, where she came across an old birthday card that turned out to have a dollar tucked inside. "It became evidence. To this day she says, 'You threw away *money*.' She talks about it like it was a thousand dollars."

When she left for college, Nelson took along her own hoard. "I had this mindset that you had to surround yourself with all the stuff you could conceivably need," she says. "It took a while to realize I had control over my belongings." The turning point came when she moved in with her fiancé eight years ago. "I was able to fit everything I owned inside my Chevy Malibu," she says.

Almost two years ago, while surfing the Internet, Nelson discovered that her mother's strange compulsion has a name: hoarding. What it doesn't have is a cure. Experts believe 2 to 3 million people suffer from this syndrome, usually discovered through gruesome raids on condemned dwellings containing scores of dead animals. And whenever an elderly hoarder is found living in the rubble, the same question arises: How could the family let that happen?

Seeking solidarity with others who share the secret shame, Nelson cofounded the group Children of Hoarders last year. As many as 1500 visitors log on to its website each day



FAMILY BAGGAGE: Elizabeth Nelson captured her childhood home on film.

(childrenofhoarders.com), comparing notes about maggots found in Mom's car, biohazards in the living room, and parents so out of control that they had to rent apartments to sleep in because their stuff had consumed an entire house. The site's message boards are filled with discussions about lingering anger, guilt, social anxiety, and, perhaps worst of all, a suspicion scientists are only now beginning to explore: that hoarding may be genetic.

What causes hoarding behavior and how to treat it are questions few researchers have tackled, but Randy Frost, Ph.D., a Smith College professor of psychology who cofounded the New England Hoarding Consortium, has uncovered some surprising clues. Hoarders, widely regarded as crazy cat ladies or lazy slob, are in fact the opposite: perfectionists. "They have an excessive concern about doing things right and not making mistakes," Frost says. As a result, hoarders have "great difficulty making decisions."

Nelson grimaces, remembering how she once told her mother about a par-

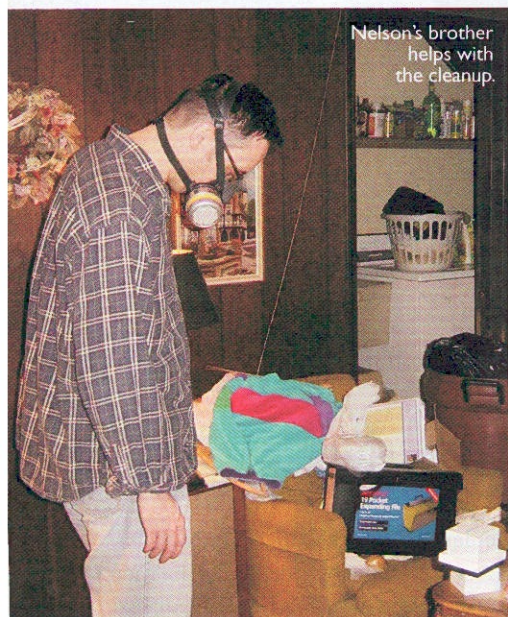
ticular handbag she loved, only to discover the following Christmas that her mother had bought her 15 purses. Choosing just one had proved too difficult. "Your present," Nelson remembers her mother proclaiming grandly, "is that you can pick one!"

Despite such excessive spending, hoarders see themselves as responsible stewards of material goods in a wasteful world, rescuing items that still have value. "My mother once read that if you get a run in one leg of your panty hose, you could cut it off and match it with another run-filled pair. After that, no panty hose ever went in the trash," Nelson says with a rueful laugh.

Even with Noxema-girl looks and a law-school degree, Nelson admits to struggling with low self-esteem—a major issue for children of hoarders, who believe their parents valued "stuff" more than their own kids. It has, she says, made her hyperaware of showing affection for her boys, Hugo and Henry. At the same time, it's tough to shake the years of guilt from her mother's insinuation that any mess was the fault of >>

Self-esteem is a major issue for the children of hoarders, who believe their parents value "stuff" more than their own kids.

her four children. "A lot of us are afraid to let people get close to us," Nelson says. "We're afraid they'll see *us* as the problem, like our hoarder parents did."



THE TOPIC OF DISPLACED blame pops up frequently on the website Nelson runs with founder Donna Austin, 37, who owns a real-estate business with her husband in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. "We don't have a handle on what a 'normal home' should be like, so we fear being judged when people visit—that it's not perfect enough," says Austin. Children of hoarders often share traits like those seen in adult children of alcoholics, she adds. "We kept a family secret for so many years—and we continue to keep it in adulthood." But while there are proven therapies for substance abusers, there are no templates for interventions with hoarders.

Aging exacerbates the issue. As long as a hoarder keeps adding to her things, "she feels like she has a purpose for living," Austin says. "Hoarders have a fear of being 'done.'"

For a person who hoards, having clutter taken away "feels like having your identity ripped out," says Frost, and the resulting anger can prompt a hoarder to cut off loved ones altogether and become even more isolated. But for Nelson, something had to give:

By spring 2006, her childhood home had become a health hazard, especially for her disabled father, whose access to the only downstairs bathroom was blocked. After luring her parents out of state to visit their grandchildren, Nelson and her two older brothers swooped in, put on gas masks, and went to work.

"We cleaned for a solid week of 14-hour days," Nelson recalls. "The last stretch, I worked 36 hours straight."

When her mother returned home, she was at first stunned, then furious, staying up through the night to make lists of what was missing. When Nelson begged her to get help, her mother countered that she was too old to change and that her children should respect her privacy. Nelson replied that age was all the more reason to seek help—this mess would fall to her children to deal with once she was gone. "Do you really want us to be angry at you when we're supposed to be mourning you?" Nelson asked her.

Such was the nightmare Tracy Hill faced last year. Her mother, a respected surgical nurse at the local hospital, led a

high school she was a popular cheerleader, but she knew better than to invite friends over and instead built her social life around other people's homes.

After Hill moved out, her mother became increasingly antisocial. "My brother used to knock on her door, and she'd freak out, saying he was rude to drop by without notice," says Hill. Then, in March 2006, concerned because Hill's mother hadn't reported to work, coworkers stopped by her house and discovered her body amid the garbage in her dilapidated home. She had died of a heart attack at 61.

At the hospital, nurses took her shaken children aside and tried to forewarn them about the house. When Hill and her brother insisted on seeing it, the hospital suited them up in protective clothing. "Steve went in first," Hill says, "and he came out with his hands on his head, crying really hard, and he said, 'It's bad, Trace, real bad.'" The horror Hill confronted that day, she says, "will be etched in my brain for the rest of my life. For over a year, there was no hot water or heat. The tubs were so disgusting you couldn't shower. There were birds that

"The tubs were so disgusting you couldn't shower," says Hill. "Birds had been left dead in their cages. The ammonia smell was overpowering."

double life as a reclusive hoarder in a house without hot water or working toilets, overrun by mice. Hill, a fun-loving 38-year-old Albuquerque newlywed, and her brother, Steve, remained on friendly terms with their mother but hadn't been allowed inside the house since they both moved away for college. It was the same treatment Hill's father used to receive: After her parents divorced when Hill was 6, her mother used to make her wait outside on days her father was picking her up for visitations. Once, years later, when her mother wasn't home, she let her father in. Disgusted by the mess, he cleaned up what he could. When her mother returned home, she was livid, and Hill vowed never again to "betray" her. In

had been left dead in their cages. Five dogs were running amok, and the ammonia smell was overpowering. There was a dead dog wrapped in a towel in the garage." She still wonders where her mother was bathing and how she managed to show up to work with her hair and nails neatly done.

"In truth, they're perfectly normal except when it comes to what they own," says Frost. "People with this problem are no different than the rest of us"—so the denial that exacerbates their hoarding habit may be completely undetectable to those outside their home.

Clearly distraught over her mother's death, Hill now wishes that she'd anonymously reported her mother to authorities. It took months to get the house >>

into saleable shape, and not a single belonging of her mother's was salvageable. When she died in squalor, her hidden shame became her children's public humiliation. "It's a small town. I was senior-class president in high school; Steve played football. Everyone knew us," Hill says. "It was all over town."

For others, public humiliation can't come close to their larger fear: that this illness is hereditary. "I don't know where the lines of normal behavior are," confesses Veronica, a 32-year-old Bostonian and the only child of an extreme hoarder. The hereditary nature of the illness is evident in her own obsessive tendencies, though she's battling back with therapy and a supportive boyfriend. "I've done a lot of compulsive buying," Veronica admits. And getting rid of anything is agonizing. "It's a big emotional effort. I develop this anxiety, and then I don't think clearly. Even opening mail—I'm reluctant to do it, because then what do I do with the letters? So mail tends to pile up, then it goes in one bin, then under another bin for storage. I'm afraid it's going to get worse as I get older, and I'm going to turn into my mom and this awful situation she can't get out of."

Veronica first recognized her hoarding tendencies when she moved in with roommates after finishing college. "I had a difficult time," she says. "I'd leave things in the common area that didn't belong. I knew my roommates were uncomfortable with my dishes piling up in the sink, but actually doing them was difficult for me."

Now living with her boyfriend, Veronica focuses on confining her mess to certain areas—like a corner of the bedroom. When it's time to start weeding out, she turns to him for support—just having him in the room, working quietly on his laptop, helps quell her fears of throwing things away. "It's easier if someone else is there, because it distracts me. The anxiety doesn't build so much."

She has also learned to appreciate some of the surprisingly positive attributes of being a hoarder's daughter, like uncommon resourcefulness: With no repairmen allowed in her house while she was growing up (the mess was too embarrassing), she became adept with tools before she was in junior high—rigging up a garden-hose shower in the bathroom when the plumbing conked out, learning to wrap pipes and patch minor leaks with epoxy.

For Veronica and other adult children of hoarders, repairing the damage within is another matter. Nelson has put her career aside to raise her sons, her obvious joy in motherhood underscoring a lingering anger: How could her own mother have treasured anything else—everything else—more? In Cabo San Lucas, Austin finds herself compulsively throwing out things she later realizes she actually needed. She still instinctively panics whenever the doorbell rings, no matter how pristine her home. And in Albuquerque, Hill is only now able to mourn her mother, remembering her kindness, her talents as a painter. Slowly but surely, these daughters of hoarders are moving on, trying to put the mess behind them. **mc**

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