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REAL ESTATE

After 30 Years and \$100,000, I Finally Let Go of My Storage Space

It took me decades to part with all the things I had stored away — but now I know I'm not alone



Fred Bernstein (center) and his family after clearing out the storage unit. FRED BERNSTEIN/WSJ

by Fred A. Bernstein

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There are all kinds of storage wars.

There is “Storage Wars” the TV reality show, now in its 17th season. Junk dealers bid, as dramatically as possible, on the contents of abandoned storage spaces. Occasionally the winner has a windfall—a Montebello, Calif., unit purchased in 2013 for under \$4,000 contained an estimated \$300,000 worth of art. But most of the contents are worthless, except to the producers. Their original series has led to “Storage Wars: Texas,” “Storage Wars: New York” and other lucrative spin offs.

Then there are the storage wars raging in at least 15 states, between the \$60 billion a year self-storage industry and local officials who see the facilities as hogging space that could be put to better use.

And there are the storage wars that rage within ourselves, between our practical and our sentimental sides, over the cost of storing things that deep down we know we will never need.

I know a lot about that kind of storage war.

In the 1980s I bought a house overlooking a river in Connecticut, where I had expected to enjoy quiet weekends reading, gardening and relaxing with friends. But there were two big problems. First, the house, which dates from the 1860s, always needed work. Typically, I would arrive from Manhattan on a Friday night, exhausted, to find a problem, like a pipe leaking in the basement. Saturday morning would be spent not relaxing but frantically trying to find a plumber.

The second problem was sui generis: A few weeks after I moved in, the town ran a bulldozer across my property, turning the narrow dirt road that until then had dead-ended at my porch into a thoroughfare. Why? A small bridge on a road parallel to my road had collapsed, and the town, while trying to get it fixed, had decided to run a detour through my previously tranquil two acres. According to the town, it owned an

agement to build and operate a road there, and someone should have told me that before I bought the house. Incensed by the steady stream of traffic on “my” driveway, I soon put the property on the market.

But if I was happy to be rid of the house, I wasn’t ready to be rid of its contents, including furniture and artworks I had chosen with some care. I didn’t have room for them in Manhattan, but I thought someday I might own another weekend house. Luckily, a facility called A Storage Solution had just opened in New Milford, Conn., a few miles from my house. It consisted of several long buildings with dozens of blue garage doors, as well as a Cape Cod-style house for the resident-owners. I rented the largest unit available—10 feet by 30 feet, a veritable mansion of a storage space—and had the entire contents of my house transported there. Filled with my furniture, with paintings and posters leaning against its corrugated metal walls, it looked like the house in microcosm, as if I had moved, under duress, to a shipping container.



Bernstein's storage unit at its worst. FRED BERNSTEIN/WSJ

Over the years, when I should have been taking things out of the storage space, I found myself putting things in. But most of the time, my only connection to the space was

paying for it. Over nearly 30 years, the cost went from about \$100 a month to nearly \$400 a month. (Once owned by a sweet couple who lived “above the store,” it was eventually bought by one of the industry leaders, Extra Space Storage.)

Arranging for the bill to be paid automatically let me ignore the mounting charges, but every once in a while reality would hit: I had spent nearly \$100,000 storing things that together weren’t worth a tenth that much. I sometimes hoped I’d get a call in the middle of the night: “The building burnt down, and all your stuff is gone. Congratulations!”

But that was just a fantasy. The bills kept coming.

At least I knew I was not alone. When I wrote about my storage dilemma on Facebook, comments poured in by the hundreds. There was lots of advice that, while well-meaning, grossly underestimated the magnitude of my predicament.

Suggestions like “rent a station wagon and take things to Goodwill” might have worked for someone with a lot less stuff than I had.

Some ideas made sense. “Take a good photo of each item you care about, well lit and well composed,” one friend suggested. “And put the photos in a folder called special things. It helps you part with the physical objects.”

Still, I wasn’t prepared to throw away the books, art, collectible pottery and furniture I’d spent real money on. But picking out the items worth selling, finding buyers for them, and then shipping them to wherever posed daunting logistical challenges. I lived two hours from the storage space and didn’t own a car.

So what if, instead of selling everything, I tossed it in the trash? A true capitulation, but even that wouldn’t be easy. The facility, its fortunes dependent on people moving in but never moving out, didn’t provide a dumpster. I would have to pay someone—pay someone!—to cart my stuff to the town dump, an insult-on-top-of-injury that I just

ouldn't abide.

felt defeated, but I had company. Many of the Facebook comments were from people who had no solutions but wanted to commiserate. Some faced worse storage predicaments than I did.

One, a professor who has lived on the West Coast for decades, has storage spaces in two small upstate New York towns, filled with furniture he had acquired during trips to Asia in the 1980s. He knows he will never have room for the tables and chairs and ornate cabinets, but they reminded him of adventure, of possibility, of youth. And those are things he couldn't bear to part with.



oe, known professionally as the Junk Juggler, hauling Bernstein's belongings away. FRED BERNSTEIN/
/SJ

n desperation, the professor and I hatched a plan: To bypass our irrational attachment
o our things, I would empty his space, and he would empty mine, a kind of “Strangers
n a Train” approach to ending our reciprocal addictions. But I ultimately decided I
ouldn't let someone else go through my stuff—my lack of organization was
umiliating.

'inally, a few years ago, my husband put his foot down. We were two days from leaving
n a family vacation when he made his announcement: “We're not taking another trip

until we empty out the storage space.”

and so we canceled our vacation, rented a minivan and made our way to Connecticut for a three-day stay at a motel not too far from the house I used to own. And for three days my husband, our sons and I worked in the driveway of A Storage Solution alongside a hauler named Joe but known professionally as the Junk Juggler. I had swallowed my pride and agreed to pay him nearly \$1,000 to cart away furniture and other large items. While he dealt with those things (some of which I could have sworn he said were worthless but later sold for healthy sums on eBay!), I tackled the boxes of personal papers.

The surprises came one after another. Programs from all kinds of events—an early Madonna concert; memorial services for Keith Haring and Abbie Hoffman—that I barely remembered attending. My high-school graduation speech. My notes on interviews with Lucille Ball and Jackie Gleason. Old family photos. Notes apologizing for slights long forgotten, from people I’d also forgotten. (Whoever you are, I forgive you.) There were missives from lovers I’d also forgotten, and even a photocopy of a suicide note. It was signed “Steven.” But Steven who? I knew a lot of Stevens. (I eventually figured it out.)

Now I am writing a book about some of the things I found in those boxes, and the memories and emotions they evoked. If I’m lucky, the book will be a bestseller and I can say I was right to save those thousands of pieces of paper. If the book doesn’t sell, I’ll be no different from the tens of millions of Americans who are filling up storage spaces, and paying hundreds of dollars a month for the privilege, but can’t quite figure out why.

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