

# Hoarding habit tough to break

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It all started, innocently enough, with a childhood rock collection.

But decades later, the middle-aged mother of three sons found herself raging in a wild family fight that left her temporarily homeless, barred from a house so stuffed with papers, furniture, clothes and other hoarded goods she was banned from living there.

How did it get to this for the Vaughan resident?

Now 54, Sandra (not her real name) grew up in Toronto, the daughter of what she describes as poor Italian immigrants who she said were both hoarders.

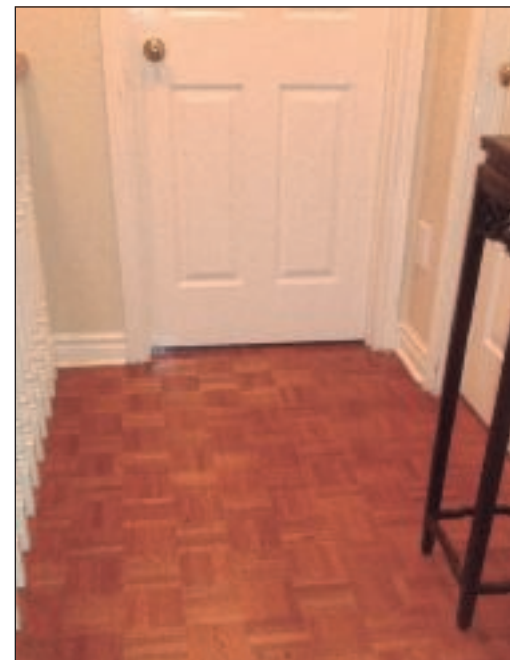
"It was more my father than my mother. They had the immigrant mentality and it was whatever you could get for free," she said in an interview last month.

She believes she picked up her hoarding habit from her parents and said her desire to acquire more and more stuff comes down to a "fear of being poor."

Sandra, who works in the education field and lives on her own after a divorce four years ago, said her hoarding came and went in phases over the decades but intensified when she split up with her husband. In addition, her three twenty-something sons chose to live with their father, so now alone, Sandra was free to hoard at will. And she did.

"I would get a high from collecting the stuff, a physical high. I could pick up a huge, heavy cabinet but then found I couldn't lift it down off a truck," she said in describing how hoarding made her feel.

She started piling "collectables" such as papers, clothes and furniture items she found by the roadside on recycling days, in her sons' old rooms and the house eventually became so full, it was



Submitted

**A hoarding disorder forced a Vaughan woman from her home. Above, the images show the state of her home before and after CHATS helped her to declutter.**

difficult to get in and out of the front and back doors.

Eventually, something had to give.

The big break for Sandra came this past April, when her family carried out an intervention of sorts.

She said her sons came to her house and started trying to throw out some items. She confronted them and amid a lot of shouting and yelling, a neighbour called the police. Once the cops noticed the state of her home, they called the fire department, who told her she couldn't stay there because the entrances to the back and front door were so cluttered it was a fire and safety hazard.

It was the wakeup call Sandra desperately needed and it has changed her life, she said.

Forced to live at a friend's home for two months while coming to terms with her issues and getting her house to a state where the

fire department allowed her to live there again, Sandra has been getting help with her hoarding issue from CHATS York Region.

"I started in July with CHATS, I see a therapist and my family doctor is aware of it (hoarding)," Sandra said.

She is working hard to slowly declutter her home and shows off before-and-after photos of rooms that were once a hoarding nightmare and later, spotless.

"It's very difficult to stop hoarding and to declutter but I don't go out on recycling and garbage days (to grab stuff) anymore," Sandra said.

She avoids stressful situations as best she can, as she figures they trigger hoarding behaviour and believes, like any addict, she'll always have a desire to hoard.

She said she'll just have to fight the urge to do it.

"It's always going to be a part of me," Sandra said.

## HOW TO HELP

When it comes to hoarding, forced clearouts don't work.

"It's very traumatizing and you're only focusing on the symptom of hoarding, not the underlying issue," said occupational therapist Alda Melo, who has seen at least 100 hoarders over the years in her practice.

Melo, who is working with CHATS York Region to help counsel hoarders in a program sponsored by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, said in a forced clearout, "what we find is six months or a year later, you have as much stuff as you had before, if not more. And it builds distrust toward providers."

Melo said hoarding is defined as a mental disorder with varying degrees of severity. And treating it depends on the client.

"With some clients we use harm-reduction and try to focus on minimizing risk. It's not required that the individual stops hoarding, but organizing and discarding only what's necessary," she said.

With others, the work is on cognitive therapy where the effort goes in trying to teach clients to think differently about why they hoard.

Melo said she finds that hoarders tend to have much more stressful lives than non-hoarders which may be what helps trigger hoarding behaviour.

"Many also have other mental health illnesses, which is very common and may be living with depression. We see very high rates of that. Obsessive compulsive behaviour is also common" with hoarders, she said.

Her approach, in general, is try to try to teach them skills, modification strategies and changing behaviours.

"They may not be ready to start discarding but ready to start reducing acquisition. It goes hand in hand.

"There is no expectation or thinking that you will cure hoarding disorder," Melo said.

She did add it takes years to work through hoarding issues and client's must be determined to stay with it if they want to declutter.

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