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GOTHAM GIGS



LIGHTENING THEIR LOADS:
Apolonia Edwards helps
hoarders gain relief from
their burdens, both
materially and
psychologically.

Her business is cleaning up

Tired of getting laid off, Apolonia Edwards found her niche helping hoarders declutter their homes

There is the clutter that's talked about in the best-selling book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, which helps people pare down their closets. And there is the clutter that demands the services of Apolonia Edwards, who can spend weeks emptying and then cleaning an apartment that has become a health or fire hazard.

It's a job that requires a therapist's empathy for compulsion issues and a project manager's ability to break down an overwhelming task into small steps. At least those are the qualities that the Jamaican-born Edwards credits for her success in building Ideal Cleaning Services into an enterprise dedicated to hoarders—with her own technique for decluttering.

The onetime model started what was a side business in 2001, offering office and residential cleaning. Her full-time job was as an IT project manager in the financial industry. Gradually, her cleaning service began getting requests for decluttering, which she found more rewarding.

"I realized that with my project-management skills, I was really good at it," Edwards recalled.

"And I started to remodel my business plan and developed my own technique."

Edwards had the added qualification of having dealt with the issue growing up. Her father was a hoarder, and as a child she was the one who helped him.

In 2008, when Edwards was laid off from the imploding investment bank Bear Stearns—her fourth layoff in seven years—it seemed time to focus on her own business, which she now runs with four regular cleaners. Referrals come from social workers, hospitals or family members. Sometimes a client on his or her own will want a fresh start.

Edwards' technique includes playing music to make "decluttering as normal as possible" while a two-person team sorts belongings into labeled trash bags. She talks with the client about what to keep, while garbage is thrown away daily. Jobs can stretch from eight hours to several weeks—and cost from \$300 to \$10,000.

"It's hard work, there are hardly any days off, but I'm not laid off anymore," Edwards said. "And I get to help people and make a difference in their lives."

—MATTHEW FLAMM

APOLONIA EDWARDS

AGE In her 40s

BORN Jamaica

RESIDES New York City

EDUCATION Pursuing a bachelor's degree in organizational management

MANY TYPES Hoarders accumulate different things, and to different degrees. Edwards has worked with people who shop compulsively and throw nothing away, as well as with those who hoard books, newspapers, bottles, trash or animals. Hoardings can be scattered around or piled to the ceiling, leaving narrow paths through a home. Her most serious case took six months to declutter.

CLEANING IS JUST A START In 2012, Edwards became a certified life coach to help guide clients once the cleaning was done. She also would like to study mental health so that she will be able to offer counseling.