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Truly odd jobs The Betty Brigade has seen it all - the disgusting, the weird, the illicit

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Sharon McRill doesn't care if you call her Betty, just as long as you call her when you need someone to plan a party, help conquer your overstuffed closets or wait for the cable guy while you're at work. McRill's full-service concierge business, the Betty Brigade, takes on a broad spectrum of odd jobs - some more odd than others - in and around Ann Arbor.

Friends tell her she should write a book about the things she's seen working in people's homes. She may have to, because some of those tales aren't going to make it in a family newspaper.

"Most of our clients are very normal people with normal, everyday 'Please come walk my dog' kind of needs," McRill says.

This isn't about those people.

Can't take it with you

While helping one woman clean out her home and move into a retirement community, the Betty Brigade found a bag full of short pieces of string labeled "String too short to use." The woman seemed surprised they'd only found one bag

Another client hired the Betty Brigade to help his family prepare for a move to Arizona. The wife was an "extreme" collector who refused to thin out her treasures. The husband refused to move them across the country. That left the Bettys and the couple's grown children to go through the house, sorting things for donation and the dump.

"In one particular room I opened the closet and there was no air, no space, from the floor to the ceiling of the closet," McRill says. "As we emptied it, we found two file cabinets and a five-drawer dresser. It was a walk-in closet, but you couldn't tell."

In over their heads

The Betty Brigade used to get regular jobs from a high-level executive who fancied herself a do-it-yourselfer. McRill was sad to see her move out of town; she kept the Bettys busy fixing projects gone awry, like the bathroom she painted with big multicolored geometric shapes.

"She decided that didn't work, so she went to the fabric store and bought this gauzy material and put it on the walls," McRill says. "It looked like a harem exploded in her bathroom."

Another client called to see if the Bettys could help do something about the intense cat smell at his elderly mother's condominium. McRill visited the woman, who was 83 at the time, and found that she had trouble bending over to scoop out the litter box. It didn't get done, therefore, and the cats had started doing their business wherever they chose. In addition, she didn't like her neighbors to see her taking out her trash, so it had been accumulating in the basement, cats running rampant in it, doing cat things. Then the basement flooded.

"But wait," McRill says. "There's more. Then her condo complex had an infestation of those roly-poly bugs, so every step you'd take down there it was 'crunch, crunch.'"

The Bettys ended up cleaning up, reboxing all of her valuables and putting them on shelves they'd installed in the basement. And for \$18.75 a week, they come in once a week, empty the cat litter and take out the garbage.

Super supervision

Over Labor Day weekend, McRill was watching a pair of bunnies for a couple that was out of town. She happened to arrive at the house without the "pet book," a big binder that has specific instructions for each pet and what to do.

But she knew what needed to be done, and the book was back at the office, so she walked into the house-setting off the home security system as soon as she turned the key. With the alarm shrieking, she realized the alarm code was written in the pet book, which was back at the office. And even if she called the office, there was no one there to answer the phone because it was Labor Day. Meanwhile, the alarm company called to see if everything was OK, and she explained the situation to them. Figuring she might as well do the job she'd come to do, she let the rabbits out in the house as instructed while she cleaned their cages. They raced around the house riled by the alarm.

The alarm finally stopped while McRill was cleaning the cages, but when she opened the back door to take the litter outside, it went off again, re-riling the rabbits, which had just started to settle down.

About that time the sheriff's deputy pulled up.

"I eventually got (the rabbits) back in their cages," McRill says. "The sheriff said this happens all the time with pet sitters and house cleaners. But it had never happened to me before, and it was really embarrassing to have to leave a note for the client saying, 'I set your alarm off.'"

One of the Betty Brigade's regular organizing clients, suspicious that her husband might be having an affair, asked McRill if she could have someone watch her house while she was in Florida.

"I gave it to one of my staff because she lived nearby and she was really excited about it," McRill says.

The Bettys ended up calling the client in Florida after a woman arrived at the house, parked her car in the garage and closed the door. The client called her husband and the female visitor left in a hurry.

"That was definitely atypical," McRill says. "I don't expect people are going to call us for that."