

## Behind the makeover

What happens when an HGTV show invades a Chapel Hill couple's space

DANNY HOOLEY, Staff Writer

Ryan Agler says it once felt as though someone was trying to trip him when he walked into his hobby room.

The 10-by-16-foot space used to be Agler's bedroom back when he and his girlfriend, fellow UNC graduate Cary Salzmann, were only roomies. The couple had turned it into a hobby room for his computer-building projects and her craft projects. Instead, it became a hobbly room.

Towels, pillows and dirty clothes were strewn across the floor among cables, boxes and wires. Power strips were plugged into -- what else, power strips. Agler's long-forsaken weight bench was covered with computer parts and a ceramic dog's head.

Agler says he was "80 percent" responsible for this mess. But Salzmann was not blameless. She shared some of her man's pack rat and just-put-that-anywhere tendencies. She explains: "I gave up."

Enter Home & Garden Television's "Mission Organization," whose help the couple sought.

"Mission Organization," with former model and CBS and CNN correspondent Gail O'Neill as host, sends in a professional organizer to help homeowners with indoor disaster areas.

Several seven- and eight-hour days of sorting, cleaning, building, painting, arguing and -- here's the dirty little secret of reality TV -- retakes of flubbed or boring scenes are condensed into a 23-minute show.

The News & Observer hung out during four out of the five days in August when the Nancy Glass Productions crew filmed an episode at the couple's home. Reality TV is hard work -- and not as spontaneous as it looks.

### Days One and Two: Drudge work

It's 9:50 a.m. on Aug. 5., day one of shooting. After two hours of setup, it's time to shoot O'Neill introducing the couple and the room.

Agler, a 29-year-old software engineer, asserts himself as a natural reality actor with irrepressible enthusiasm and some wicked eyebrow maneuvers.

He and Salzmann, a 25-year-old research scientist, make a cute couple -- both blond and about the same diminutive height. They constantly touch each other and exchange knowing looks.

But director Cyndi Haas wants to hear a little change in their on-camera interaction. Years ago, Salzmann got into the habit of calling her then-platonic pal "Agler" instead of "Ryan."







Before: Ryan Agler and Cary Salzmann's computer and crafts room was (how to say it delicately?) a mess. The couple's room was selected for a makeover by the HGTV show 'Mission Organization.'

Staff Photos by Harry Lynch

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"She needs to call him Ryan," Haas says. "I think its weird calling someone by their last name."

The "Mission Organization" crew is small -- a director, a soundman, a cameraman and an assistant.

Haas monitors continuity. That's particularly hard when shooting interview-prompted commentaries at the end of the day with Agler, Salzmann and Long. When some of their statements refer to things that aren't supposed to have happened yet (although they actually have) Haas abruptly cuts them off with "OK, pause-er-ooni."

Haas, a former punk rocker with an orange streak in her brown hair and four piercings on the back of her neck, refers in her motherly way to cast and crew as "Burgers" ("Are we excited, Burgers?") and asks for a lot of retakes.

When something could be said better, she makes people say it again. When two people stand face-to-face, she cuts and tells them to "cheat to the camera," which means standing diagonally to the person next to you as if you were awards presenters.

When O'Neill is done, it's time to introduce Florida designer Kristin Long. O'Neill leaves to prepare for the next day's shoot at the Chapel Hill home of Sean and Robin Whitsell (that show will likely air in February). She will return in two weeks for the ending.

Long, 29, assessed the room two weeks ago and devised a design she'll reveal another day. Today will be spent sorting items into bins labeled "crafts," "items meant for another room," "office supplies," "computer equipment," "trash" and "donate."

The "trash" and "donate" bins are the hardest to fill. Long overcomes resistance by pointing out that if you haven't used something for a year, it's time to move on.

Agler's ugly purple shelf-and-drawer unit gets the heave-ho, but Long and Agler argue over a sentimental item of his childhood.

"Do you need the little army men?" Long asks.

"Oh, they're so cool," Agler coos, holding them.

"Are you going to be playing with them?" she presses.

Agler keeps his army men, but concedes the weight bench.

Sorting takes up the rest of the afternoon. The following Sunday will be spent doing more of the same sorting and purging. It's drudgery, but it's liberating.

### **Day Three: Hey, that's my chair!**

On Aug. 21, it's day three. Today, the couple will paint over the room's childish purple walls and green trim.

The new color scheme? Carolina blue with white trim.

Agler is stoked about the new look, but something is irking him.

"They're trying to make me get rid of my La-Z-Boy I have at the desk," he complains.

Agler's beloved cream-colored La-Z-Boy recliner is imbedded with gray filth on the back, seat and arms. When Agler snuggles with a grunt into his dingy but comfy man-womb, he's in heaven, surrounded by five monitors.

Try explaining that to Haas, Long and Salzmann. Agler is on a losing team of one.

"The recliner's got a ..." he says, before being cut off with Haas' gentle but resolute: "Honeeeeyyy. There is no recliner."

The chair is deposited in the kitchen, where it's tipped on its side in front of the refrigerator.

The painting finished, a crafts desk project for Salzman turns out to be a headache. Parts H and C aren't fitting together right.

Long spends lunchtime sipping a strawberry smoothie from Foster's while trying to put this thing together. She finally does.

"G was upside down," she announces.

Work resumes about 1:35 p.m., as cameramen Ken Hackney and Stephen Cook, holding high-definition digital cameras, shoot Agler hammering casters into a computer cart.

"Watch your back," Haas directs Agler. "All I can see is your butt."

At 2:22 p.m., the next task is to put up shelves above Agler's desk for his monitors, and in the cleaned-out closet for computer servers.

An old thrift store frame is hung on the wall as part of an "Inspiration Station," where Salzman's current sewing and painting ideas can be displayed.

The day ends with commentaries, and Long pretends it's still morning: "Today we have a lot of work ahead of us."

#### **Day Four: Fit for dogs**

Early afternoon of Aug. 23: Playing for the camera, Agler feigns appreciation for his new wheeled desk chair by bracing a foot against a wall and pushing himself across the room with a "whoo-hooh!"

A point-of-view shot is set up for unrolling a beige rug on the newly revealed hardwood floor.

"Talk about how much you like the rug, so I don't have to debrief you about it later," Haas directs Salzman.

"Oh, I like this rug," Salzman says like a pro. "Feel it!" Their dogs Binky and Poe, who have been scared to enter this room long before Day One, run in and settle in on the new doggie beds that Long placed in the space. Their verdict: Paws up!

#### **Day Five: It's a wrap**

It's early Aug. 25, the last day of shooting, and Agler is in his front yard pitching in as a best boy grip. He helps the crew hold up a cardboard scrim that deflects the sun away from O'Neill as she does her wrap-up.

"All it took was a little elbow grease and the help of a professional organizer," O'Neill tells the TV audience. At 10:50 a.m., a driver takes her to the airport.

Inside, in the former room of shame, an ugly multicolored ceiling fan has been replaced with a sleek black one.

The floor is clutter-free. Agler's desk has four monitors on it, and there are more on the shelves above. Salzman's desk is tidy, with everything arranged by type in drawers and slots.

#### **Now, real reality**

Fast-forward to real life in January: The Inspiration Station is gone and the La-Z-Boy is back.

A huge new monitor is propped in front of the old chair, surrounded by big side monitors like some kind of bizarre cockpit.

Still, Long's principles seem to have made an impression on the couple, and the room remains livable. Agler says he's happy with the outcome.

"Dude, it's awesome."

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