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says Laura Stivala, a real estate agent and accredited staging professional with the Joe Finnerty real estate team at Prudential Patt, White Real Estate in Bethlehem Township, Pa.

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Staging your home for a buyer's market

SKILLED STAGERS OFFER ORGANIZATION AND decorating tips to get your house market-ready.

BY KELLY HUTH
The Express-Times

When you take your first steps into what could be your new home, the last thing you want to see are dog-eared chew toys, piles of junk mail and dirty dishes.

"They (prospective buyers) can't see past the clutter," says Jessica Leigh Costa, an independent home stager in Forks Township.

While it may be hard to hear, a potential buyer also doesn't want to see pictures of the grandkids or your neon green bathroom.

"Think of it from a buyer's perspective. They want to buy your life — neat, clean, organized and stylish," Costa says.

Sellers hire Costa when they want to get a house sold quickly. She evaluates a home from top to bottom in an initial \$50 estimate to let homeowners know what they need to focus on. During her first visit, Costa will share her design

HOME STAGING

■ **Style by Jessica Leigh Costa**

For information, call 908-894-8760 or e-mail stylebyjl@verizon.net

■ **Laura Stivala and the Joe Finnerty Real Estate Team**

For information, visit lehighvalleyhomesonline.com

interior decorator 20 years ago and recently made the switch to home staging.

An initial home staging walkthrough and professional photography session is provided to customers upon listing with the company, she says. Stivala even brings two presents for the homeowner: a welcome mat and an empty bin. The bin, she explains, is to encourage the owner to begin taking personal effects off the walls and removing clutter from the space, room by room.

"The buyer wants to see the bones of the house, not your clutter," she says.

For homeowners who have an empty home on the market, it's the opposite effect.

Stivala says home stagers work on a limited budget to shop for furniture and accessories and set the tone for walkthroughs.

Where to start?

That first impression comes down to buyers being able to picture themselves in a potential house.

Start outside and work your way in. Mow the lawn, weed flower beds, tidy up the porch and cut down bushes in the spring, Costa says. Add a door wreath to make the exterior look welcoming.

When you're satisfied with the exterior, tackle the inside — one room at a time.

Costa says homeowners should start by depersonalizing and removing knickknacks, and toning down obnoxiously bright paint colors. But not everything has to be beige.

"You don't have to spend a lot of money to make your house look good," she says. "A can of paint can go a long way."

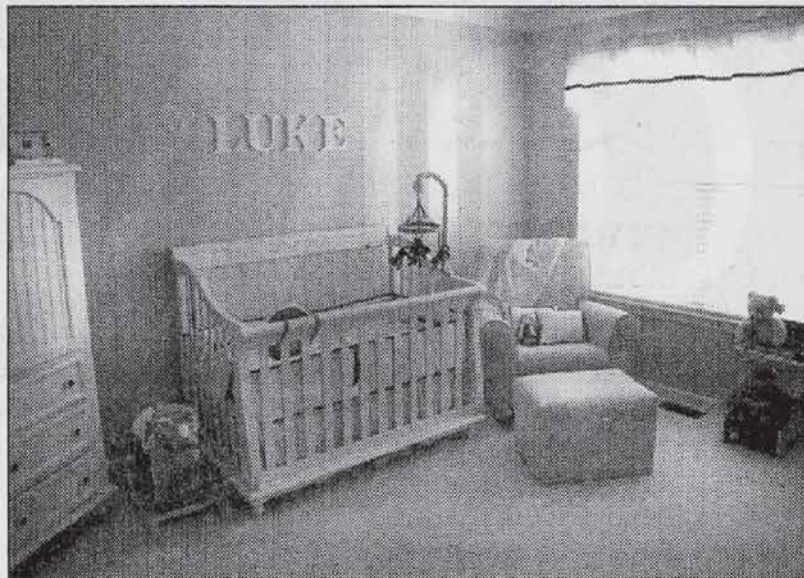
Gray is a trendy room color right now, accented with navy blue accessories while white bedding can give a room a fresh, crisp look. Khaki and neutral tones are always safe

and organization ideas, and if you want her to come back on an hourly rate she'll move furniture, shop for pieces and pack up boxes. She draws the line at scrubbing floors.

Hello and goodbye

Home staging, contrary to popular belief, is less about decorating and more about depersonalizing your home.

"It's un-decorating, streamlining and simplifying," says Laura Stivala, a real estate agent and accredited staging professional with the Joe Finnerty real estate team at Prudential Patt, White Real Estate in Bethlehem Township, Pa. Stivala started as an



Home stager Jessica Leigh Costa added stripes to the walls, crown molding and used children's toys to accessorize the "new" room. See the before picture below.

bets, Costa says.

Pick a room to start and stick with it — choosing a color or theme. Buy pillows, blankets or candles to carry that color throughout the room. If you've got a budget to shop for accessories — be patient, look for bargains and bring your measurements with you.

"The buyer wants to see the bones of the house, not your clutter."

Laura Stivala, a real estate agent and accredited staging professional

In bedrooms, invest in organizational drawers that can slide under beds and out of sight. Make sure your bedspread matches the curtains, so the room looks up to date. Buy multi-purpose furniture, such as a storage ottoman, that can hold armfuls of clutter with no one the wiser.

In closets and cupboards, Costa suggests adding decorative baskets to shelves to streamline clutter. Costa's also a fan of Real Simple Solutions Slimline Hangers (50 for \$29.99 at Bed, Bath & Beyond) to trim down thick closets.

Scrub. Rinse. Repeat.

And they don't call it spring cleaning for nothing.

"When you know someone is coming, clean out the sinks, put away your mail and dirty

dishes," Costa says.

Get the carpets and windows cleaned and add slipcovers to old, outdated furniture to make a room look new and modern, Costa advises. Even spreading dark curtains can help a room look more inviting to a potential buyer. And for goodness sake, put away your laundry — a cardinal sin for showing a home.

"If people see you're taking care of furniture and how it looks on the inside, people will think you're also fixing parts of your home, like the roof," Costa says.

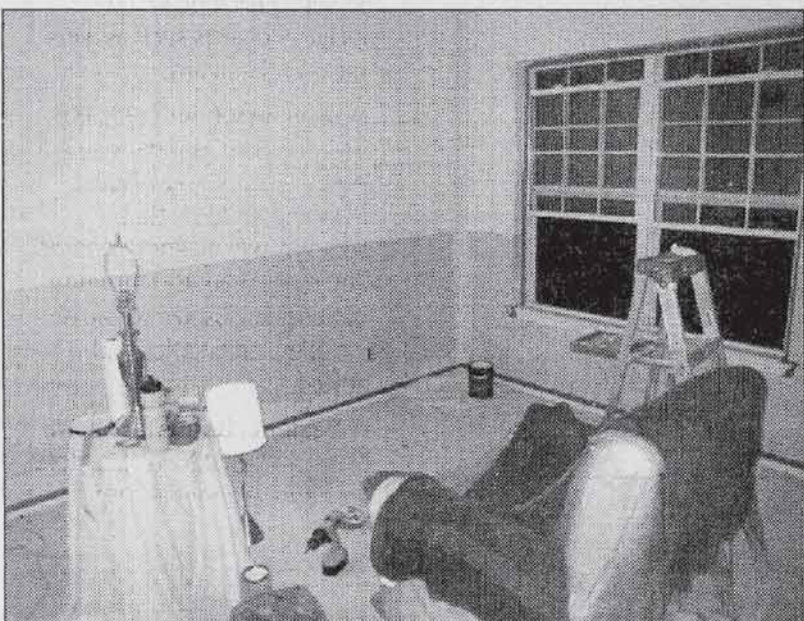
Tack onto your to-do list fixing anything that rattles, and doors or windows that are difficult to open and close.

Is it worth it?

Moving furniture, taking pictures off the wall and removing clutter won't cost a homeowner any money, Stivala says. But other renovation projects like painting and re-carpeting will require a seller to put more money into a property they're leaving. Is it worth it?

According to staged-homes.com, sparse decorations can make a room seem larger, and since square footage sells, staging a home can add to the bottom line.

"Most of the literature on staging says a home sells faster and for more money when it's staged," Stivala adds. "It will cost less to stage the home than your first price reduction."



PHOTOS COURTESY JESSICA LEIGH COSTA

Costa turned this two-tone room into a gender neutral one that would appeal to potential buyers.