

The Columbian  
**Life**

**Section D**

Today's weather picture by Lisa Jimenez, 9, Battle Ground, Captain Strong Elementary



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# PROJECT: Procrastination

Experts offer tips on how to finally complete that special chore

By **BRETT OPPEGAARD**  
*Columbian staff writer*

Just a weekend project, Neil Fiore thought at first. But the table ended up being in Fiore's garage for 18 months before he finally finished sanding enough to repaint it.

Fiore, a psychologist, life coach and author of books such as "The Now Habit: Overcoming Procrastination While Enjoying Guilt-Free Play," thought this project would be a good chance to put his ideas to a test. During the experiment, though, Fiore learned that finishing such a job can strain even the most trained and motivated minds. He took notes.

Fiore's travails, along with the experiences of Clark County

residents dealing with their own troublesome projects, attest to the complexities of why we struggle to follow through on intentions and how to overcome the obstacles to finishing the projects we start.

"The vast majority of us are procrastinating about something," Fiore said. "People are notoriously ineffective self-managers when they have to finish a big task."

Fiore said that in his case, the trouble started when he learned that the table could not be dipped in solvent because of its age and the intricacy of its leg carvings. That meant all of the work had to be done by hand.

"While this table sat in my garage, I studied my behavior and feelings," he said, noting that

as the job became more complicated and time-intensive that the reward of a finished table kept getting pushed further into the future.

"We humans are made for pleasure and success," he said. "Not for long-term struggle, unless we have a plan and a passion."

Fiore acknowledges that even he, at one point, gave up hope of finishing the table. The conscientious mind, he's found, "seems to only be able to hold four to eight hours of work, a five- to 10-page paper, or painting one wall of your back bedroom, not 100 hours of work, (writing) a book or painting the entire house."

He worked through the hopelessness by trying the techniques that he preaches, basically committing to specific 15-minute

stretches of work. "I let go of doing a perfect job and got it to be good enough so I could paint it," he said. "I now love that table."

He added that people learn in childhood the negatives of "having to finish" something, and they subconsciously rebel.

"When you 'have to' that means you don't want to," he said. "It also means, or else. Or else what? You'll be miserable. You'll die. It'll be awful. When you learn that voice, then you must rebel against it, like the stress response of fight or flight."

Fiore instead suggests giving yourself a choice. If you absolutely must do this project, then make a specific plan to get it accomplished and stick to that schedule.

He added that instead of taking the next small step in the completion of a project, most people reward themselves for giving up quickly. They might fiddle for 10 or 15 seconds, for example, then give themselves a coffee break or check e-mail. Then move on to something less taxing.

"'Finish' puts your mind into the future, but it doesn't tell your body or your mind what to do next," he said. "Once you tell yourself where to start, to do this now, then you will feel excitement and productivity rather than anxiety."

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## Other PERSPECTIVES:

Unfinished projects seem to linger in everyone's lives, which has generated many opinions about this phenomenon.

■ "It's the buffet principle. Our eyes are bigger than our stomachs. ... You need to take an honest look at the idea, 'Are you going to do it? Are you really going to do it?' Is this the year that you are going to knit that afghan, or should you just give away the needles? People are optimistic. Sometimes we take on too much and too many things at once, and things start falling apart."  
— Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, a health psychologist at University of New Hampshire and author of "Well-Organized Home: Organizing Techniques for Inviting Serenity Into Your Home."

■ "We often think that there is something wrong with not finishing a project, but it suddenly dawned on me that maybe for many of us the paradigm is a different one. Maybe instead of being result-oriented, those of us who love the projects we start are more process-oriented and don't need the end product to feel gratified."  
— Gari Julius Weilbacher, personal life coach at Coaching Partnerships.

■ "Those who leave projects started and unfinished for years usually fit one of two personality types that psychologists call: The Thinker and the Enthusiast. The Thinker ... they overthink much of life, such as starting a project, and then get slowed by thinking about what's next versus doing what's next. The Enthusiast is ... someone enamored with ideas only who quickly tires of putting ideas into action and moves on to other ideas."  
— Kim Garretson, editor of LivingHome.com.

■ "Most people think of unfinished projects as another thing they're procrastinating on. They make themselves feel bad about it. But since the reason they took up the project in the first place was for the enjoyment or challenge, and if they're no longer enticed by completing the project, why bother? ... Starting the project was just part of your path, your learning, your in-the-moment interest. You don't know how it may serve you in the future in some way. Who says you need to complete it?"  
— Kerul Kassel, personal and business coach at New Leaf Systems.



## Local people & THEIR PROJECTS



LaRue Helwig, left, says she'll marry Ron Thomas, but only after he finishes this sunroom. He's been working on it for a couple of years now, and Helwig is losing patience.

MIKE SALSURBY/The Columbian

**Ron Thomas**  
72, Vancouver

- **His unfinished project:** A sunroom, and the wedding that hinges on its completion.
- **How it started:** Thomas asked 65-year-old LaRue Helwig to marry him, and she accepted, on the condition that he cleans out his garage enough that she can use it to park her car.
- **So Thomas decided to build a storage room for his stuff, including a collection of 400 apple boxes, as part of an addition to his house that also includes a sunroom and deck.**
- **How long has it been:** "We were engaged on Valentine's Day three years ago."
- **What does Helwig think:** "I'm not moving in until it's finished. ... If I did that, it would never be finished."
- **Her solution:** "I tell him

- to just hire somebody and have them do it. He's just kind of procrastinating, redesigning and redesigning. He's a perfectionist, and he doesn't think anybody can do it but him. ... I say that they are putting up a tram and high-rises in Portland faster than he's doing that lousy sunroom."
- **Thomas retorts:** "She has no concept of how things get done. ... I've had a helluva time finding contractors. I'm slow enough, but you just can't get craftsmen to show up when you want them anymore."
- **Have the costs been more than expected?** "When I put in the building permit, I thought I would spend about \$25,000, and it would take three or four months to do. Well, it's approaching \$75,000, and it would have been about \$150,000, if I just would have hired everything out. The details just eat you up."
- **Anything else slowing the process?** "I spend all of my time at

- her place. When I'm there, I'm not getting anything done here. I'd rather be there, spending time with her than finishing the sunroom. But if I was home, working on the sunroom, we could be together full-time sooner."
- **Do you have any other unfinished projects?** "I've got 100 started. I had a buddy get me an old-growth cedar telephone pole that I want to make into a totem pole. That's been laying in my driveway for 12 years, and I haven't done the first stroke on that. I haven't done anything with my landscaping at my house for the 20 years I've been here. I created a big garden area about a year ago and haven't planted anything in it yet."
- **Are you going to do those things?** "As long as you have projects, you don't die. Delays and minor setbacks don't bother me at all. I don't give up. ... A lot of people, it kills them to not have something done. I think there are more important things in the world. A relationship is more important than rehabbing an apple box."

For more local people and their projects, see Page D7

*your*  
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# PROJECT: Procrastination

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## Margaret Bender

69, Vancouver

- **Her unfinished project:** A huge craft room filled nearly to the ceiling with stuff that needs to be organized or given away.
- **How it started:** When Bender and her husband, Stuart, built their 4,400-square-foot home on 10 acres in Salmon Creek, the couple made sure to include plenty of storage. That meant constructing two three-car garages as well as a 500-square-foot studio for Bender and her crafts. Emptying the closets and attic of their old house during the move 12 years ago, Bender immediately filled up her new room and has been working on organizing it since.
- **What you should know about this room:** "It's actually bigger than my kitchen."
- **What's in it?** "I save old clothes. I have my wedding clothes, college blazers, all of my old hats. Some things are brand new. I stocked up on nightgowns one time, thinking my girls would wear them. But they didn't like them. I make gift baskets — bath baskets with lotions and bath salts, breakfast baskets with oatmeal mix and pancake mix, Italian dinner baskets with wine and spaghetti and candles. I have candles, tablecloths, place mats. Memorabilia from my childhood, dolls. I have piles of books and papers and magazines. ... If the room wasn't built on concrete, my husband says, it wouldn't be able to hold the shelves."
- **Storage philosophy:** "You can't be undergaraged."
- **What is the real issue?** "I just like to shop and buy things in quantity."
- **A disclaimer about the picture:** "My husband and I spent three days cleaning the room before your photographer got there."
- **Goal:** "I want to get this done within the next 10 years, so I won't leave it for my kids."
- **What's in the way?** "It's so messy, I get overwhelmed by the job. Sometimes, I just have to close the door and do something else, like go shopping."



Margaret Bender has two three-car garages and a craft room bigger than her kitchen, but she still doesn't seem to have enough space.

**Steve Kieran, left, struggled with his novel for decades, until his children, Skyler, 16, middle, and Jessica, 13, reached the age of his main characters. He's using his experience with his kids now to help inform and inspire him to finish the book.**



**Glenna Ainley thought she would sew Christmas stockings for her children. But her daughter just turned 19, and the girl's stocking still isn't complete.**



## Glenna Ainley

43, Camas

- **Her unfinished project:** A Christmas stocking for her daughter, Kayla, which she began at the girl's birth and now vows to complete before the 19-year-old graduates from college.
- **How it started:** Ainley made a cross-stitched stocking for her oldest son, Stephan, and finished a second one when she was in the hospital for the birth of her youngest son, Kellen. She found a pattern that she liked better for the girl, so she took Kayla's name off the finished stocking, put her baby boy's name on it and planned to make the new pattern for Kayla.
- **What happened?** "I got most of it done and then started teaching full-time again. So I put it away."
- **The annual cycle:** "Every year, I get it out in January and think, 'Oh, I have all year.' Then, in December, I start to panic."
- **What would it take to finish?** "I have put several hundred hours into the stocking already. Even though I'm so close, I also know I have a good 500 hours left to get it done. ... Mentally, I've given up."
- **Considered any alternatives?** "I offered to pay for someone to finish it. Kayla didn't like that. She said she wanted me to do it. I asked her what if she didn't know. And she didn't like that, either."
- **Anything like this happen to you before?** "I started making a needlepoint pillow for my dad when my husband, Warren, and I were married 23 years ago. I did really well on the (main art of) ducks but the background was so tedious. I tried to work on it for five or six years, then I totally gave up on it. I finally threw it away. He doesn't even know about it."
- **How was the stocking issue handled over the holidays?** "I wanted to have it hanging on the mantle when she came home (from school). Every year, when I get it out, she gets excited, and asks: 'Are you really going to finish this year?' So I know she's disappointed about it. ... As the pressure gets greater and greater, I find myself avoiding it more and more."
- **What have you learned about yourself from those experiences?** "I start a lot of projects and don't finish them. My creative process works best in the planning and implementing stages. Those are the challenges that I'm looking for."

## Steve Kieran

47, Camas

- **His unfinished project:** A debut novel, 20 years in the making so far.
- **How it started:** Kieran left the Air Force in 1986 and used his G.I. Bill money to go to night school to study writing. He ran a printing press during the day but kept working on an outline for his book, "The Return of Rasputin," until he finished that in 1990. He then hammered on drafts of the piece for the next decade, rewriting the book a couple of times. Agents and an editor gave the same feedback, that his protagonist, a 16-year-old boy, wasn't accurate enough. So he gave up for a few years. But Kieran said as his kids — Skyler, 16, and Jessica, 13 — grew into that age group, Kieran became inspired to try again.
- **Any technological issues over that span?** "I started with a Commodore 64 (computer). I tell you, one blip of the screen, and hours of work would disappear. ... Microsoft Word wouldn't properly open my older chapters, so at one time, I was using three generations of (word processing) programs."
- **How will you measure success on the book?** "The most important thing will be to actually sell it. ... I don't want to self-publish it."
- **Why did it take so long to get to this far?** "Raising kids. Living on a farm, taking care of cows and pigs and chickens. Building up a real estate business. Those things took priority. The time it takes to be creative like that, it felt a bit selfish at the time."
- **What kept you coming back?** "It's my calling. It really is. It's my natural talent. ... Everybody is given a gift. Your job is to share it with the world. That's been my driving force through all of this."



## Beth Evanson

36, Vancouver

- **Her unfinished project:** A scrapbook about her adopted daughters' lives in China before they were brought to America.
- **How it started:** While adopting Abi, 3, and Aly, 2, with her husband, Greg, Beth Evanson began collecting embellishments to create books of China memories for the children. She spent about \$500 on supplies, including stickers, stamps, postcards, paper and scrapbooking tools, plus another \$1,000 for a laptop computer and digital camera. She took more than 1,000 pictures on the trips. But, she hadn't touched any of the material before a few weeks ago, when she made it her resolution to finally get the books put together.
- **What have you done so far?** "I kept my supplies all over the house in plastic tubs. Some were slid under the bed. Some were stacked. ... I think part of it was that I didn't really have a place to do it. If you get five minutes, with two little kids, you might be able to crop some pictures, but not if you have to spend 20 minutes getting everything out and organized and then cleaned up. So I put my stuff in a single storage area, where I can have piles of things, and I don't have to put them away."
- **Any other obstacles?** "Perfection. I'm always telling my (two older) kids to do it well or don't do it all. That keeps me from diving in. ... I don't even want to commit to anything that I know I won't be able to do well."
- **Does that make this project feel like a competition?** "I have a dear friend who's an artist, and her scrapbooks are beautiful. ... So my new philosophy is that I can't compare mine to (work) by anybody else. I just need to get the pictures out of the bags and drawers and get them onto pages. My kids don't care if my handwriting isn't pretty or that it doesn't look like it should be on the cover of a scrapbooking magazine. They just want to see the pictures."
- **What's been the key to getting started?** "Lowering my expectations. With four kids, life's too crazy. ... There just isn't time to do everything."

**Beth Evanson bought materials to create a scrapbook for her two adopted children, Abi, 3, left, and Aly, 2. But finding the time to put those things together has been tougher than she imagined.**

### THREE STEPS THAT WILL HELP YOU FINISH A PROJECT

- Step One:** Consider dropping it — throwing the parts in the trash, abandoning the idea or hiring someone to do it. Force yourself to make the choice. If you absolutely can't give up on the project, then make a specific plan.
- Step Two:** Choose a particular time and day that you are going to spend 15 to 30 minutes on that project. Don't just say Sunday morning. Say 8 a.m. this Sunday, and set a timer. When that time is up, choose to either continue for another specific stretch, or stop for the day. Anything more than 30 minutes to an hour requires the brain to shift into perseverance mode.
- Step Three:** At the end of each short session, ask yourself when you are going to start the next one. Be specific and hold yourself accountable. Also, don't forget to treat yourself for being able to break through the inertia and make progress.
- SOURCE: Neil Fiore, psychologist and author of "The Now Habit: Overcoming Procrastination While Enjoying Guilt-Free Play."