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Rescue Mission

North Shore couple gets by with a little help from their friends

BY LISA SKOLNIK | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY BERARDI & SALLY GOOD / PHOTOFIELDS

There are two schools of thought about doing business with family and friends: do and don't.

Heide Rubenstein and Danny Weber stood firmly in the latter camp when they began renovating a gracious old home in Highland Park to accommodate their blended family of five children.

"It was a 130-year-old Queen Anne that needed tons of work," Heide says. "So much work that it scared everyone else off." But she realized its potential as soon as she saw it. "I got Danny over here immediately, and we made an offer the next day."

The purchase ended a yearlong search, and started a yearlong renovation. The couple hired a highly recommended contractor to oversee the project, thinking he would be perfect for the job. They were wrong. He didn't return phone calls, and when he did, "He couldn't answer our questions anyway," Heide says. Desperate for guidance, the couple kept calling on Heide's ex-husband, Jonathan Rubenstein, who happens to be a contractor.

After a month of this, they had an eureka moment: They obviously respected Jonathan's advice, so why not just hire him? He got started immediately, picking up the pieces that the former contractor had let fall.

The most pressing problem was the awkward layout of the first floor. All the rooms opened onto a long hallway that ran the entire length of the house, but didn't connect to one another. Even more cumbersome was the L-shaped kitchen. Small to begin with, it was bisected by two, space-guzzling elements—a fireplace that jutted out of a wall and a back staircase with a superfluous spiral.

The first problem was easy to correct. The team framed new openings in the walls that connected the living and dining areas, the long hallway, and the kitchen. This established a more functional, family-friendly traffic flow on the home's main level.

The second issue was more of a challenge. "The hearth was this heavy, brick pit that protruded out of one wall, and the back staircase fanned out of the other wall. There was no room to walk in there," Heide says. Jonathan brought in Highland Park architect Richard Becker, who devised a plan to streamline the kitchen and maximize its floor space by removing the fireplace and reconfiguring the back staircase.

But the newly forged kitchen was still small by contemporary standards, and the family's needs were large. "We often have all the kids here with their friends," Heide says. "And I like to have people over. It's not unusual for me to cook dinner for 10." Another family friend, Terrell Goeke—president of the eponymous interior design firm—came to the rescue. "Our 13-year-old sons are best friends, so I knew all the action the space would see and was a little familiar with Heide's sense of style," says Goeke, who specializes in kitchen, bath, and interior architecture. "She needed to maximize the space, but it also had to fit her eclectic sensibility."

Heide wanted the kitchen to have a "vintage feel that wasn't too period or pure" and all the latest and greatest technology. Goeke provided a clean-lined space that blends sleek, state-of-the-art stainless-steel appliances with cabinetry and millwork that embraces a subtle country aesthetic. "It really does mine every square inch of space," Heide says.

"I used all kinds of tricks," Goeke says. To increase the efficiency of what he classifies as "basically a glorified galley," he divided the space into work zones by function, with cooking on one side and cleaning on the other. The former sports a six-burner Viking range and a small utility sink; the latter is anchored by a farmhouse style, peg-legged porcelain sink flanked by two dishwashers, and capped by a large bank of cabinets that holds a gigantic Sub Zero side-by-side.

The little sink is a water source for entertaining and cooking, while the rustic one adds visual relief and character to what would otherwise be an unbroken bank of cabinets. Best of all is its functionality. "Several people can work in the space at the same time and not get in each other's way," Goeke says.

To furnish the rest of the house, Heide decided she needed the help of a decorator. Again, she hired a highly recommended pro, which proved to be another big mistake. With her living room furniture on order, Heide brought in Highland Park designer Alison Yastrow, who she already knew. "She was a customer of mine when I worked at Anthropologie, and I knew our personalities and taste would be simpatico," Heide says.

Yastrow welcomed the challenge and viewed the job as an adventure. "Heide has this wonderful, unconventional sense of style that embraces the quirky and the classic," says Yastrow, principal of her eponymous design firm. "She'll mix an Old World, hand-printed wallpaper with a riotous zebra-print runner, and it will work."

However, it's never easy to jump into someone else's project. "All I had were receipts and fabric swatches," Yastrow says. "The furniture was all custom-made, so I didn't know what anything would look like until it got here." Once the living room furniture from the first designer finally arrived, Yastrow helped with the rest of the home. More evidence, Yastrow points out, that "whoever said, don't do business with your family or friends was wrong." **MH**

LISA SKOLNIK, A CHICAGO WRITER WHO SPECIALIZES IN DESIGN, IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO MIDWEST



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