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A cottage with country charm

• Former horse farm in Minnetonka still boasts its original barn — and horse-themed frescoes.

By KIM DALMER
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When Brad Neary and his wife moved to Minnesota 10 years ago, they were looking for a distinctive vintage home.

"We're old-house people," Neary said. "We had a French Normandy-style house out east, and we were looking for that kind of character and charm."

So they started their search in the historic neighborhoods of St. Paul. But Neary, while browsing online, stumbled onto some photos of a brick house for sale in Minnetonka. "We hadn't looked this far west," he said. He decided he wanted to see the intriguing house and arranged a showing. The house, set on 2.2 acres overlooking a pond, didn't disappoint him. "You see the horse stable first," he said. "Then the English Country cottage. It looked like a storybook."

Neary bought the home, which has a name, Tall Pines, as well as an equine pedigree. It was built in 1925 for Tom Foley, a political cartoonist for the Minneapolis Star who also bred horses. The property, originally a 50-acre estate with pastures and an orchard, included a 4,000-square-foot, two-story barn.

The Nearys didn't use the barn for horses — they let their friends store boats and cars in it — but it remains picturesque,

Barn continues on H3 ▶



Photo by Spencer Coffey
A fresco painted by the home's original owner, political cartoonist Tom Foley.



Whitney and Andy Blessing and their three children, Weston, Gwyneth and baby Freya, in their new breakfast room, formerly a back porch. It was designed by Krista Schwartz, Daisy Finborough and Anita Johnson of Indicia Interior Design.

MULTI-TASKING MANSION

This year's designer showcase home, a Victorian in St. Paul, has been transformed into a B&B up front and a family home in back.

By KIM DALMER • kdalmer@startribune.com

Andy and Whitney Blessing's home will soon wear as many hats as they do. He co-owns a construction company. She runs a preschool. Together, they're raising three young children: Gwyneth, 5, Weston, 3, and baby Freya, 5 months. And, come Aug. 1, they'll be launching a new venture, the St. Paul Bed & Breakfast.

"This house just had a story, and we wanted to be part of it," said Whitney.

The couple bought the brick Queen Anne mansion in 2011, then handed it over to a team of interior designers for this year's Showcase Home Tour, a fundraiser for the local chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID).

The 1882 house had already lived through many chapters by the time the Blessings saw it and fell in love with it. Originally built for Frank Shepard, son of David Shepard, who built much of the Great Northern Railway for James J. Hill, the house started out grand and gorgeous, with copious woodwork, multiple fireplaces, a turret and leaded-glass windows. But over the decades, much of the home's beauty was lost. Rooms were carved up, windows were plastered over, sleeping porches were converted into kitchens. The house was expanded at least three times, including a 1950s-era addition in front that interrupted its original wrap-around porch. No longer a single-family home, it had moonlighted as many things, including a women's shelter, boarding school and nursing home.

It sat vacant for more than two years, until the Blessings



The Blessings' Queen Anne Victorian in St. Paul will open as a B&B after the designer showcase event. At right, an exposed brick chimney is incorporated into the new decor.

decided to rescue it and return it to its former glory. "The house called to us," said Whitney. "I've always wanted an older home, brick, on a corner in a fun neighborhood."

The couple, who had bought, restored and sold a number of floor-uppers, were looking for their next renovation project, but they knew this would be their biggest challenge yet.

ASID continues on H3 ▶



ASID SHOWCASE HOME TOUR

What: A restored Queen Anne Victorian mansion, including 22 spaces transformed by 30 interior designers.

Where: 325 Dayton Av., in St. Paul's Cathedral Hill neighborhood.

When: Open for public self-guided tours Wednesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., through June 9. Culinary evenings will be held Wednesdays and Saturdays. Designer-led tours on Tuesdays; Ladies Night Out on June 6.

Cost: \$20 at the door or at www.mprmag.com/home-tour or 612-336-9247. \$15 tickets available at ASID MN office at 1245, Bachman's, D'Amico & Sons, Hirschfeld, Intersource, Putna, Bubble Tea, the Bibelet Shop and more.

SEE MORE PHOTOS of the showcase home at startribune.com/homegarden.

Waterfront Home Tour

Nearly 100 Homes Open Today - 1 p.m. - 5 p.m.

Entire Tour on CBBurnet.com and in the Open House Directory, labeled with an asterisk*



The third-floor family room posed several design challenges, including angled ceilings and walls, small windows and exposed sprinkler pipes. A design team from Ethan Allen transformed it into a cozy retreat. Photos by JOEL KOTAMA • joelkotama@earthlink.net

MULTI-TASKING MANSION

ASID FROM HI

"I've heard so many stories," Andy said. "People would say, 'We almost bought that house.' It was a huge place, reasonably priced, but nobody knew what to do with it. We knew what to do—and how to do it."

They could envision their kids growing up and playing in the revitalized house. Whitney could picture herself sleeping in the back room with its 18th-century green-tiled fireplace and built-in secretary. They even saw potential in the front addition, described as "chunky" in a book about historic Twin Cities architecture.

Whitney, a former real estate agent, who was inspired by their daughter's experience at Montessori school to become trained as a teacher herself, decided it was a perfect place to open a school, Cathedral Hill Montessori.

Operating a B&B was an idea they'd thought about trying someday, maybe as a retirement career. But that idea moved onto the fast track once they found themselves with a significant historic home. "It made sense to do it here," Andy said. "What do you do with a house like this?"

Andy, who co-owns A-Squared Design/Build/Remodel, took on the job of general contractor, and the family moved into the 450-square-foot carriage house. But the Blessings knew they needed help. After touring last year's showcase home on Lake of the Isles, Whitney asked Krista Gibbons, a parent from her school and a designer, whether she thought their house had the potential to be the next showcase project. She did, so Whitney sent an e-mail to the ASID Showcase Home committee, who saw the home's potential—just as the Blessings had.

"The minute I walked through the door, I fell in love with it, and what it could be," said Kimberly Herrick, project chairwoman, whose Herrick Design Group ultimately designed the home's master suite.

"I was a little surprised," Andy admitted. "They took a huge risk. This could have gone terribly wrong. It was such a big project."

Not a fund

Admittedly, the couple had limited funds for design. "We weren't strolling on a trust fund or family inheritance," said Andy. "The budget was tight. And with 10,000-square-foot, any little thing is exponentially expensive."

In addition, the home's historic status complicated the project. Three different historic preservation entities had to oversee and approve all plans.

The Blessings wanted a small addition on the back for a mudroom, but they had to make do without one because it would have altered the exterior. So the designers incorpo-



1. The master suite, designed by Kimberly Herrick of Herrick Design Group, used an original green-tiled fireplace as the starting point. 2. The marble-tiled master bath. 3. The laundry/trait room, designed by Kristen Shekita of Inuit de la Mole, features task "zones" and a hand-painted chevron floor by Crista Mares. 4. A small third-floor kitchen near the children's bedrooms was designed by Mary Maney of Crystal Kitchen Center. 5. Weston's bedroom, designed by Bob Edman and Laura Engen.

rated mudroom-type built-ins and coat hooks into one end of the family breakfast room instead. "We weren't able to take it as far as we wanted, so the designers had to step up to the plate," Andy said.

So did he. Andy quickly discovered that he wasn't just renovating his own home, he was serving 39 interior designers on a tight schedule. "When I'm the general contractor, they are the client," he said. "I had to make the designers happy with their spaces."

"You had me to please, too," his wife added, with a smile.

The couple gave the designers a lot of leeway in the front of the house, where the B&B will operate out of the original grand rooms built for the Shepard family.

The Blessing family, on the other hand, will live brookstone-style, on three levels at the back of the house, their residence separated from the four B&B suites — "so guests don't feel uncomfortable," Andy said.

After the showcase ends June 9, the family will finally move into their new home. They're looking forward to hosting Thanksgiving and other gatherings with Andy's large extended family.

"We love to entertain," Whitney said. "We've been without a place to do that for a couple of years."

And they can't wait to relax and recharge in their new owner's suite, where every detail has been tailored just for them. "Herrick knows us so well, she knows which side of the bed we sleep on," Whitney said. She's looking forward to luxuriating in their master bathroom, which boasts a walk-in marble shower with recessed niches for shampoo and other bath products.

"We've never had a master suite with a walk-in closet," Andy said. Having a personal retreat will give them

"the kind of refreshing we need to get up in the morning and keep running our businesses and raising our family."

The house is ready for its new chapter, too. "It had such an institutional feel," said Andy, who was amazed at how many original architectural details survived the house's many remodelings and incarnations.

When they started removing layers of "improvements," they heard unfamiliar sounds, Whitney noted. "It sounded like the house was breathing. The house literally sighed."

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coming wednesday in variety take a look at the home's B&B spaces, and how designers put a modern spin on Victorian style.