

Haven: The Walkers' now-redesigned rancher in Moorestown



Bill and Debbie Walker completely transformed a midcentury Moorestown rancher by opening up the rooms.

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The moment she stepped inside the flat-roofed mid-20th-century ranch house on a quiet street in Moorestown, Debbie Walker began redesigning it — at least in her head.

This spirited Texan, whose love of home, family and entertaining is locally legendary, saw beyond the small rooms and blocked views. What she envisioned, instead, was an open, light-splashed, informal sanctuary for an empty-nester couple who wanted an easier life than the one they were leading in a more rational 5,500-square-foot, five-bedroom house.

Bill Walker, more reserved than his wife but also able to reimagine space, quietly took in the rooms of the house that day and basically saw the same potential. He also saw the sweeping views of the Moorestown Field Club behind the house and knew that its unobstructed vistas had to become part of the master plan.

Which is how it came to pass that, in November 2010, this couple officially moved into the dwelling they had spent a year reworking, with the help of a crew of experts who became friends.

"We Texans aren't standoffish," Debbie says, in an example of understatement. "Home is important — and it's a place to share."

Today, the property, recently featured on the annual Moorestown Home & Garden Tour, is a standout, both inside and out.

"There was a lot of opportunity for change, and we took advantage of it," says Bill, a native of Moorestown who met Debbie in graduate school in Texas and brought her to his hometown, where he heads a three-generation family electrical-contracting business.

With architect Neil Johnson and contractor Paul Canton, both of Moorestown, the Walkers added dormers and height to the long, flat structure, literally raising ceilings.

"We definitely wanted a home that lived the way we do," Bill says. "No 'museum' rooms, an open kitchen area, and definitely ways to enjoy the Field Club views."

"I wanted the look and feel of a library, not a living room, as another main element in the house," says Debbie.

Step inside the front door, and the instant impression: This is exactly as the owners imagined it could be.

Large, open spaces reveal a living area in which shelves of books are a dominant part of the décor. Behind it is a kitchen/family room/eating area that is often filled with family and friends on Monday evenings, the designated "let's get together" night at the Walkers'.

"We usually have at least 15 people, with lots of kids in the mix, and there are some Texas specialties like our special crispy mac and cheese," says Chef Debbie, who also presents trademark salads and an endless array of desserts.

Guests eat at a long table and at a carefully designed counter area designed at chair height that's also equipped with enough outlets to accommodate multi-course food fiestas served buffet-style. A butler's pantry and wet bar nearby facilitate the frequent entertaining. And, yes, there's almost always a "Wow!" uttered over those spectacular golf-course views.

Hallways lead to other areas, including a master bedroom with its own outdoor patio and bath, one outfitted with a freestanding "slipper tub" that actually allows those not on the sunny side of 40 to enter and exit easily.

Bill's favorite retreat is the large office/workroom where he indulges his many interests, including bookbinding, model-making, science, and photography. His striking photos of Israel are a high point of one hallway wall. A cabinet with glass doors holds natural objects, from stones and fossils to other antiquities.

Debbie's "office" is part-nursery — the couple has two grandchildren, with another on the way. Her childhood furniture has been repurposed, offering both a sentimental reminder of the past and practical storage.

Unifying the various parts of this sprawling, informal house presented the greatest challenge, the Walkers say, and to achieve that goal they worked with two important partners.

Specialty painter/mural artist Michele Jagodzinski of Moorestown used a soft palette and customized finishes, hand-glazing furniture pieces and stenciling to give the home its warm, livable character. Areas blend, and neutral colors flow.

Jodi Swanholm, a Haddon Heights interior designer, spent months with the homeowners, helping them create and maintain the mission/craftsman look that also unifies the spaces.

Special treasures include an old rocking chair that once belonged to Debbie's father, the wear areas on its arms just as they were, and a hand-wrought cradle with a record of family history that dates to the 1800s, with each new family member's name and birthdate carved into the wood.

One of Bill's favorite things is an illuminated hallway niche. Against a beautiful mural created by Jagodzinski is a red fox carving. "A friend of ours in Maine who's a wood artist showed me a hunk of wood and told me, 'There's a red fox in there!' And sure enough, there was."

Debbie and Bill Walker still get visits from the people who worked with them on the house and share their pride in its transformation.

"It was such a fun experience," she says. "If you come here once, you're a visitor. After that, you're a friend!"