

# Piecing It Together

*Kara and Jim Griffith used salvaged materials, antiques, and other vintage goods to create a new house with an old-fashioned atmosphere*

by Beth Luberecki

**W**hen Kara and Jim Griffith began looking for a house in Ft. Myers, they knew what they *didn't* want. "We couldn't live in a house that was just like our neighbors'," says Kara, a former member of the Naples Philharmonic who now teaches violin, runs an antiques booth at Fancy Flamingo in downtown Ft. Myers, and is starting a decorating business. Instead of a dwelling in a cookie-cutter development, the Griffiths wanted something with a little more history and character. "We wanted an old house on the river," says Jim. "We couldn't find one, so we decided to build one." Jim plays viola for the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra and is the director of the Florida Arts Cultural Center.

While cruising down the Caloosahatchee River in his boat, Jim spotted an ideal piece of property, located on the water between Interstate 75 and downtown Ft. Myers. The land was chained off and totally overgrown, but the Griffiths saw its potential. They learned that the owner of the land had planned to build his dream house there but never got around to it. "So he was willing to help us make our dreams come true," says Jim. The Griffiths bought the lot in 1992. For the first couple of years that they owned the property, they'd simply come and sit by the water in two Adirondack chairs.

During that time, they looked at various floor plans, trying to find the perfect design. They finally found a home design that they liked in a magazine. The home was built in the Louisiana plantation style with a tin roof, French doors, and transom windows. That led to a research trip to New Orleans, where the couple took a driving tour of old homes on the Mississippi River.

The Griffiths began building in 1995, doing the bulk of the work themselves and putting in lots of late nights over the



**The Griffith's home has all the charm of an early 20th century lake home.**

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An eclectic blend of art and music makes the Griffith's home a sweet home.

year-and-a-half-long process. "There is definitely a lot of blood, sweat, and tears in the house," says Jim.

Although the process was laborious, the end result has been worth it for Jim, Kara, and their daughters, Nina and Lily. They've created a homey, unique residence filled with unusual touches and a lively spirit.

Built on pilings on an acre and a half of land, the house has yellow vinyl siding, a red front door, and a tin roof. Green railings with white spindles line the porch, where the Griffiths come to watch the sunset or the river's steady stream of boat traffic. It's the perfect place to entertain or enjoy a family meal.

Inside, the house features recycled heart pine flooring, remilled cypress trim, and solid cypress doors that came from a hotel in Chicago. Rescued pieces of the past also show up in the decorating scheme. Rooms are filled with a mix of antiques, thrift-store and garage-sale finds, and salvaged items. "We can't have anything ordinary," says Kara. "I'm anti-retail. I like shopping pretty much anywhere but the mall."

"As musicians, we played all over the state," adds Jim. "In every town we went to, we would find the architectural salvage places. There are little bits and pieces all around the house from many different towns." Like the oak mantle in the family room, which came from an

auction in Sarasota. Or the blue and white sink in the powder room, purchased in Miami. The couple collected pieces for years before building the house, filling their apartment with plumbing fixtures, French doors, and other finds now put to good use.

A portrait of an elegant woman in a green dress hangs in the dining room, which has been painted a peacock green shade. The painting had sat in a neighbor's garage, and the Griffiths acquired it for the frame. But when they saw how the color of the dress matched the walls, they hung the portrait and gained an "instant ancestor," according to Kara.

In the adjoining music room, a collection of bird art decorates the red walls. A well-worn Oriental rug covers the floor, purchased for \$1 at a garage sale. "The rattier the better for me," says Kara. A glass-topped desk serves as a showcase for photos, mementos, old postcards, and other treasures.

While the white cabinets and green laminate counters in the open, yellow-walled kitchen are new, the pedestal table and chairs were a thrift-store find. Kara painted them black, and now they look as if they belong on the pages of a high-end

furnishings catalog. Kara and Jim also painted the black diamonds on the kitchen floor.

Shades of sage green set the tone in the master bedroom, which features chandeliers from an old hotel in St. Petersburg and curtains purchased at an estate sale. "They're very old and very shabby and very dear to my heart," says Kara. In the cozy sitting area, Kara displays her Italian gold trays, English lithographs, and female-centric artwork. "I have a collection of collections," she says.

Upstairs, a spacious guest room has been occupied by many creative types who have passed through these parts. "We're like a little bed-and-breakfast for artists," says Jim. In addition to excellent

river views, the room includes a canopy bed, an antique dresser, a painted chair given by Jim to Kara as a Valentine's Day gift, and a bathroom complete with a salvaged sink with gold-plated, Chinese dolphin fixtures.

Since seven-year-old Nina's bedroom lacks windows, the Griffiths brought the outside in, painting fluffy white clouds on the blue ceiling and a tree on the wall. A collection of whimsically painted furniture fills the room, including Nina's

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canopy trundle bed. The room has played host to many sleepovers, and when the lights are turned out, stars glow in the dark on the ceiling.

Black and white toile wallpaper and a salvaged, black four-poster bed accent five-year-old Lily's bedroom. Kara always wanted a black and white room and had already finished the space before Lily was born. Since she was pleased with the decor and felt it was feminine enough, she simply added some toys to adapt the room for her daughter. Another kid-friendly touch: the walk-in closet that doubles as a playroom. "The girls get in there with their friends and have a ball," says Kara.

A masculine vibe pervades Jim's office, which in addition to a computer and desk also houses an air-hockey table, a couch, and a TV. A World War II-era plane propeller found in Palm Beach sits propped in a corner.

The house survived Hurricane Charley without any major damage, a testament to the Griffiths' fine handiwork. "Considering that we built it ourselves, it did well," says Jim.

The couple is proud of the fact that even though the structure has existed for just about a decade, it seems as if it has been a part of the landscape for much longer. Says Jim, "People think this is an old house, which is really what we wanted." 🐾

*Beth Luberecki is a freelance writer and the features editor of Times of the Islands.*



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