



BUILDER SNAPSHOT

Lellbach homes reflect values

By Leslie Mann

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Borrowing a tactic from the corporate world, Doug Lellbach and Debra Bennett Lellbach conduct exit interviews with clients. The result: The Naperville-based home renovation team learns its strengths and weaknesses so it can continually improve.

"Clients tell us they appreciate our honesty, our high-quality subcontractors and Doug's years of experience in the field," says Debra, who shares the title of "partner" with her husband at Lellbach Builders. In fact, Doug knows what's behind the walls of many of the houses that Lellbach Builders renovate because he was a contractor in the area when they were built. "They want to move a wall, for example, but I know that's where the builder had put the heating vents," says Doug.

The Lellbachs' niche is whole-house renovations, although they also do additions and kitchen/bathroom remodels. "Some clients are re-doing their own houses and others are buying houses to re-do," says Debra. "But they all want homes that are in neighborhoods, close to schools, shops and restaurants, but near the highway and the train station."

Their portfolio includes houses in Aurora, Downers Grove, Glen Ellyn, Naperville, Wheaton and Winfield.

The couple's own Naperville house, built in 1973, is their idea factory. In 2006, they gutted it, added about 1,000 square feet and dressed it with Craftsman-style exterior and interior details.

Debra's liberal use of color in her house is testimony to her degree in fine arts and her experience as an interior designer. By keeping costly elements such as cabinetry white or neutral, but changing the color or finish of amenities that are easy to alter, such as countertops and light fixtures, a house can stay fresh, she tells her clients.

Debra's artsy touches to her house include a fireplace surround made of leaf-shaped tiles she bought from a Wisconsin potter and a tile backsplash made by an artist in Minnesota.

Although their renovated house has 4,200 square feet, it has zoned heating/air conditioning and a first-floor master bedroom. This allows the Lellbachs to use the first floor only while their grown sons are away.

The couple met when Debra hired Doug to make some repairs at her father's storage facility business. Her design background was a natural segue into his business, which she joined officially in 2005. The yin-yang of their partnership is an advantage for their clients, they say.

"Usually, it is the wife who is the decision-maker, so she appreciates having a female's perspective," says Debra. "Women look at a home differently. They're usually the ones who are doing the cooking and cleaning and know how the traffic will flow. But men tend to talk finances and schedules with Doug."

As their clients' houses morph from the 20th to the 21st Century, the Lellbachs see common threads. "They don't want space for the sake of space," says Debra. "So, no more two-story family rooms or huge master bathrooms. They want walk-in showers they will really use, not oversized tubs that they never had time to fill. They're turning unused living rooms into offices and opening dining rooms into kitchens so the dining rooms will be used more often. And, they like amenities that add a lot of comfort without adding a lot of costs, like heated bathroom floors."

The Lellbachs' springer spaniel's name, Scout, points to Doug's avocation. An Eagle Scout, he remains active in scouting after ushering their sons through the program. His pledge to community service extends to his work for DuPage P.A.D.S., which serves the homeless. Debra also fills her spare time with nonprofit duties, including a post on the board of directors at Linden Oaks Hospital.

The Lellbachs are living their childhood dreams, they say. "I always wanted to be a carpenter," says Doug.

"And I wanted to be a designer," says Debra. "I was the kid who was always moving my furniture around my room."

Retirement, the Lellbachs say in unison, is "a fallacy." But becoming empty-nesters has allowed them to spend more time at their second home in Lake Geneva and reassess their goals. "To be a good reflection of the values I learned from my parents and to pass those on to my sons -- that's what's really important at the end of the day," says Debra.

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